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Nineteenth Century Clergymen
and Issues of Faith, Doubt and Death:
A Literary View

Irene Mary Allison

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Nineteenth Century Clergymen
and Issues of Faith, Doubt and Death:
A Literary View

This thesis attempts to evaluate the role of the Victorian clergyman, mainly of the Church of England, with reference to issues of faith and doubt in the context of Christian death.

Chapter 1 indicates the problematic element inherent in the certainty of the hope of the Resurrection and goes on to trace the development of the Christian perception of death. It leads up to the expression of nineteenth century views influenced by the theology of the seventeenth century cleric **Jeremy Taylor** representing the Caroline divines.

Chapter 2 deals briefly with **Anthony Trollope's** criticism of the church as an institution and takes examples of situational ethics from the Barsetshire Novels. It goes on to concentrate on the role of Septimus Harding who represents the tradition of the good pastor and also exemplifies 'holy dying' according to the model of the *ars moriendi* proposed by Jeremy Taylor.

Chapter 3 portrays, in sharp contrast, the death of the outsider in four of **Thomas Hardy's** novels. It focuses on the inadequate response of the institutional church to the pastoral and emotional needs of those who have placed themselves outside the perceived normal bounds of the Christian community. At the same time biblical language and Christian liturgy remain significant but are adapted to fit a changing situation.

Chapter 4 introduces some of **George Eliot's** representatives of the clergy. These include examples of the 'gentleman' cleric, of some very imperfect specimens of humanity on whose behalf she invokes the reader's sympathetic understanding, of the martyr figure and of those who serve their community with unpretentious diligence. This chapter also discusses Eliot's conception of the nature of the immortality to which her characters aspire.

Chapter 5 draws together and compares some of the complex issues and conclusions from the three writers and attempts to relate them to the ongoing historical role of the contemporary clergy and their successors.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction: The Hope of the Resurrection: pp.1-12

The Victorian Mindset: pp.12-30

Chapter 2: Anthony Trollope: The Church as an Institution: Situational Ethics pp.31-47

Chapter 3: Thomas Hardy: The Death of the Outsider: Re-inventing the Liturgy. pp. 48- 69

Chapter 4: George Eliot: The Parson as a fallible Human Being. The Legacy of a Life well lived and the Touch of a Dead Hand. pp.70-103

Chapter 5: The Writers' Verdict and Epilogue pp.104-121

Bibliography: pp.122-125

Chapter 1: The Hope of the Resurrection

**O blessed hope! With this elate,
Let not our hearts be desolate,
But, strong in faith, in patience wait
Until He come.**

George Rawson (1807-99)

In order to approach the problem of the decline in faith which beset the Christian Church in nineteenth century England, it is necessary to go to the very heart of the matter and examine how the cornerstone of the faith came to be eroded. What then is that cornerstone, or the basic belief without which Christianity will founder? It amounts to the core of the Christian faith, the belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and of the promise of resurrection of all who believe in Him. This is expressed in the words of committal from the Book of Common Prayer recited at funeral services:

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us begin by tracing Saint Paul's presentation of the hope for all believers. He spoke to his converts in Corinth about the qualities of faith, hope and love (I Corinthians Ch. 13). Whilst he exalts love as the greatest of the three in this particular context, he is at pains elsewhere to stress the importance of the other spiritual gifts that he has personally enjoyed since his Damascus Road experience. The word 'hope' (ἐλπίς) is constantly on Paul's lips, for it is in hope that Christians are saved (Romans 8: 24). He enlarges upon the efficacy of this special quality of hope with which the Holy Spirit endows the believer. It has many functions and enables the follower of Christ to suffer tribulation in this life, to transcend the experiences of this earthly life and to point to a vision of what lies beyond. The Christian must perforce exercise patience in this life and hope for that which is not yet revealed to him/her.

But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.¹ (Romans 8: 25)

¹ This and subsequent English biblical quotations will come from NRSV unless otherwise stated.

Paul assures the Corinthian church in an image destined to resonate through the ages that, at the last, all will be revealed to those of us who believe, even although “now we see through a glass darkly.”² (I Corinthians 13: 13)

Christian hope is the essential quality that, according to the apostle, is lacking in others. Wherein lies this hope, the absence of which drives the Thessalonians to despair and causes them to grieve comfortlessly over the death of their fellows and to contemplate their own death with trepidation? (I Thessalonians 4:13) We shall refer later to the specific situation in Thessalonica where Paul had to adapt his theology to offer a solution of comfort to back up his exhortation to embrace the Christian hope and trust in it in all predicaments. Let us first consider how the evangelists reinforce the teaching of the theology of faith and hope for their communities. The lesser, more mundane examples build up to provide a climax at the end of the great Passion narratives.

In the gospels the disciples, both individually and collectively, had to be reassured by Jesus when they encountered danger in everyday situations, for example when Peter foundered (Matthew 14: 31) or when the twelve were afraid of drowning in the storm (Matthew 8: 26). In the latter instance Jesus reproaches his followers: “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” This much needed faith is linked inextricably by the evangelists to the Christian hope in the Resurrection, for which Jesus strove to prepare the disciples in his predictions of the Passion and of what was to follow. Yet according to the gospel writers, in his post-Resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other women (Matthew 28: 10), Jesus had to preface his words with the admonition: “Do not be afraid.” (μη φοβεισθε). On the other appearances to the assembled disciples

² I have chosen to refer to the KJV here since it offers a more telling rendering than subsequent versions and provides the inspiration for literary elaboration.

(Luke 24:36 and John 20:21) he uses the formula “Peace be unto you!” (Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν) to calm the startled minds.

Paul too had to be reassured of God’s presence by the angel of the Lord at an advanced period of his ministry according to the account in Acts 27: 24. Yet it is with firm conviction and boldness that he proclaims the hope of the resurrection in his preaching. He argues the futility of those whose hope perishes with the ebbing of mortal life. They are most to be pitied (I Corinthians 15: 19).

The hope which Paul passes on to his converts comes in the certainty that Jesus Christ himself was raised from the dead, “the first fruits of those who died” (I Corinthians 15: 20). By the same token those who profess the hope of Salvation will likewise be raised. Paul makes a distinction between an earthly and a spiritual body and promises: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven” (I Corinthians 15: 49). It is with regard to the nature of the continuance or renewal of the physical body that great difficulty arises.

Let us consider the place of the doctrine of Resurrection in Christian history. C. F. Evans describes Resurrection as “central and constitutive in Christianity from the first”³ and refers to I Corinthians 15: 3ff and to Romans 10: 9 where the chain of dependency is established for basic Christian belief. Paul’s kerygma relies on the acceptance of his credal sequence.

Christ died for our sins.

He was buried and he was raised on the third day.

He appeared to Peter, other disciples and witnesses and essentially to Paul himself, “as to someone untimely born.” (Summarised from I Cor. 15: 3-8)

³ Article on the *Resurrection* in *New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (ed. Richardson & Bowden) p.501

Paul's insistence on the supporting evidence of contemporary witnesses who had known Jesus in the flesh serves to emphasise his teaching that the appearance of the risen Christ was in a recognisable bodily form. He is ever conscious of the fact that his own experience of encountering the risen Jesus differs from that of the original disciples, although he considers it in no way inferior. Belief in the resurrection of the body is essential for Christian discipleship. He argues the point with emphatic rhetoric to convey his strong conviction. Without this cornerstone of faith the whole foundation of his proclamation would fall away.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain (I Corinthians 15: 14).

Evans cites Paul's early writing to underline the importance of Resurrection as the badge of Christian identity at the very outset. "It was not a neutral concept, simply one expression for life beyond death, but carried with it a positive theological interpretation."⁴ The Old Testament references to Sheol as a destination for the dead had given way to the expression of a limited belief in resurrection, which had developed during the inter-testamental period. These beliefs were, however, neither uniform nor universal in first century Judaism. They ranged from refutation of the whole concept by the Sadducees to varying degrees of acceptance by the Pharisees. With Christianity came a much more explicit and dramatic statement. Thus the Pauline corpus is alive with the excitement of the hope of the resurrection which filled his converts. In the first wave of Christianity along the shores of the Mediterranean, this hope was linked with belief in the imminence of the Parousia to which Paul referred constantly. His own personal encounter is, of course, with the risen Christ and consequently his whole concept of the

⁴ *The Resurrection*, article in *New Dictionary of Christian Theology* p.501

Christian message centres on the events of the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus rather than upon the earthly life and teachings recounted in the four gospels. Hence the reliance upon the witness of the Jerusalem disciples as previously mentioned.

From the earliest days of Christianity Saint Paul in his pastoral capacity perceived the need to exhort his gentile converts not to be like those others who have no hope.⁵ At this point the imminence of the Second Coming was not doubted and there was consequently a sense of urgency and immediacy inherent in the situation. Problems nevertheless were not slow in emerging and Saint Paul had to apply all his rhetorical skills in order to convince his nascent church of the efficacy of the power of the risen Jesus and the validity of the promise of eternal life. Paul's eschatology shows inconsistencies which scholars attribute to the demands of the particular situation or problem facing him at a given juncture. This was the case with the fear of the Thessalonians that those converts who had died before the Parousia would not be saved. The conception of the Parousia changes between the first and second letters to the Thessalonians, and the change in eschatology has led scholars to question the authenticity of the later book. The vivid imagery of I Thessalonians with the added dimension of sound provides inspiration for exploitation in art, literature and music in subsequent centuries (I Thessalonians 4: 16-17).

ὅτι αὐτός ὁ κύριος ἐν κελευσματι, ἐν φωνῇ ἀρχαγγέλου καὶ ἐν σαλπιγγι θεοῦ
καταβήσεται ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ, καὶ οἱ νεκροὶ ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστήσονται πρῶτον,
ἔπειτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπομένοι ἅμα συν αὐτοῖς ἁρπαγησόμεθα ἐν
νεφέλαις εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἄερα.

We also encounter the promise, an extension of St. John's indication of the place prepared in heaven for the righteous, that "we will be with the Lord for ever."

⁵ I Thessalonians 4: 13

και οὕτως παντοτε συν κυριῳ ἔσομεθα (I Thessalonians 4: 17).

Thus the nature of the Christian hope involves some kind of transformation and relocation beyond space and time whereby those who have died in Christ will be eternally in the presence of Jesus Christ.

The imagery of II Thessalonians, possibly the work of a different author indulging in situational rhetoric, is no less impressive and offers a picture which savours of Jewish apocalyptic with its metaphor of flaming fire and the portrayal of an avenging deity.

ἐν τη ἀποκαλυψει του κυριου Ἰησου ἀπ' οὐρανου μετ' ἀγγελων δυναμεως αὐτου ἐν πυρι φλογος (II Thessalonians 1: 7,8)

The early church enthusiastically embraced the theology of the Resurrection and incorporated it into its credal affirmations. In II Esdras 2.23 one reads that the first place in the resurrection is promised to those who bury dead bodies. This is consistent with the good reputation that the early Christians earned for looking after their dead in the best Jewish tradition.⁶ It was not long, however, before the need for a technique of apologetics arose to deal with the contemptuous analysis by educated pagan thinkers as well as with the doubts of those inside the church. A major stumbling block was the insistence upon physical resurrection. “The resurrection of the flesh” seemed to imply that the omnipotent God could “reassemble the physical body for resurrection however dispersed.”⁷

This doctrine remains firmly entrenched in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion professed by the Anglican Church. Article IV contains an unambiguous physical definition of the Resurrection of Christ.

⁶ Ref. *The Liturgy of Christian Burial* p.18 and note p.117

⁷ *The Resurrection in New Dictionary of Christian Theology* p.503

Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature-----⁸

If the resurrection of true believers was to follow the same pattern, survival or restoration of the physical elements of the body was implied on the understanding that with God all things are possible. Insistence on implicit belief in this doctrine has always caused problems. Even those who adhere to the belief in the inerrancy of the Scriptures have to admit that the phrase used in the Funeral Service, “in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection”, does not come directly from Scripture. It is significant that these are the words of committal at the critical moment when the mortal remains are lowered into the earth or consigned to destruction by fire. These words have become so firmly entrenched in the Christian vocabulary that few pause to consider their provenance. The first direct use of the words seems to be that of Cranmer in 1549 in a prayer followed by reference to Philippians 3: 21.⁹ The words themselves, embedded in the Book of Common Prayer, have, as we have said, no direct authority from Holy Scripture. On the other hand they have strong resonances and will be accounted for and justified by putting together various portions from the gospels and from the Pauline epistles. One of the objections made by Puritans in 1661 to the Funeral Liturgy from the *Book of Common Prayer* was directed to the reference to “the sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life.” They objected that this could not be said of “persons living and dying in open and notorious sins.”¹⁰ This will become a hotly debated issue in Victorian novels when Christian burial is denied to those who are perceived as outcasts from society as a result of some sinful action which the church and society found themselves unable to condone. The refusal of the vicar to conduct a burial service for

⁸ Article IV: *Of the Resurrection of Christ*.

⁹ Brightman: *English Rite* vol. II P.858; Rowell: *The Liturgy of Christian Burial* p.85

¹⁰ *The Liturgy of Christian Burial*, p.92

Tess's unbaptised child in Hardy's novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, exemplifies the hard-line attitude which drove people to seek comfort and reassurance by some other means outside the church.

Before the committal of the body the priest or minister will have quoted passages of scripture, for example from Job 1: 21, Lamentations 3: 22f, John's gospel chapters 11 and 14, Romans chapters 8 and 14, I Thessalonians 4:14f. Usually the emphasis is upon the promise of Jesus to his disciples recorded in John chapter 14. Here the evangelist presents Jesus, the man from above, as making ready to go back up to Heaven "to prepare a place" (John 14: 3) for those who will follow, in other words, his disciples and by extension all those who profess Christ in subsequent generations. The reassurance of immortality, which Jesus or the gospel writer seems to consider incumbent upon him to offer in the words, "if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14: 2), reflects the need to dispel the seed of doubt which would ripen into scepticism in future generations. This would happen when the impetus of the early church was lost, as believers became more remote from the sense of immediacy attached to the promise of eternal life at the end of their days upon earth.

The "Prayer for the Mourners" in the Revised Funeral Rites of the Episcopal Church in Scotland (1987) speaks of God's gift of hope to the first disciples, saying: .

**"God of the living and the dead,
when you raised Jesus from the tomb
you gave new hope to his desolate disciples."**

John's gospel records the joy of the disciples when they saw Jesus again after the crucifixion, but it also focuses on the doubt expressed by Thomas who would not believe until he had seen and felt. Thus even in the earliest days a single seed of doubt is sown in a believing community, for the reassuring experience of Thomas was not one to

be granted to every sceptical hearer of the tale. The expectation for Christians was that they would believe without seeing (John 20: 29). However, despite the rumours hinted at in the gospels that the disciples had removed the body of Jesus, the first disciples managed to convince a growing number of people of the truth of the Resurrection and consequently of the hope for all believers. It was on this basis that the early creeds were composed. Primitive versions are already embedded in the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters. These were enlarged upon in the first three centuries by the early church, so that worshippers would have the support of an ordered system of beliefs to understand and profess. Almost every clause has been revised and debated at different periods by various branches of the church. In this context we will concern ourselves with the relevant section on the resurrection of the body.

When we profess in the creeds (Nicene and Apostles') our belief in "the resurrection of the body", we have before us, as the only recorded examples of bodily resurrection, that of the Saviour himself and the scriptural account of the raising of Lazarus in John's gospel. The fact that Mark's gospel, the earliest, concludes on a note of fear at the enormity of the Resurrection event points to the problematic acceptance of the whole idea from the very beginning. It leaves the way open for the questions of subsequent generations for which the tidied-up ending of the gospel was no solution. Indeed from earliest times pagan scholars such as Celsus and Porphyry made it their business to attempt to disprove this cornerstone of Christian belief.

In the post-Enlightenment climate where everything was placed under a microscope and re-examined in the light of science and reason, the problem became more acute. It was now intellectually acceptable to question the accounts on which long cherished beliefs were based and subject them to critical scrutiny. Reason is now the watchword. David Pailin writes in his article on the Enlightenment:

So far as religious beliefs are concerned, claims to revelation are acceptable only when they are rationally justified and their contents subject to reason's judgment.¹¹

Albert Schweitzer's scholarly work *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* gives an account of a succession of rationalisations by writers of different generations right up to his own time of the events of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and of the miracles of Jesus. From Reimarus onwards, German scholarship was particularly suited to the task of appraising and reassessing traditional beliefs. Scholars worked painstakingly through all the supernatural elements of the gospels in search of rational explanations. The degree of scepticism varies as does the credibility of the explanations, but some of the later works were destined to influence writers and thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the most influential works for nineteenth century thought was that of David Friedrich Strauss whose account, *Das Leben Jesu*, was translated by George Eliot. His systematic rationalisation of the miracles, one by one, had the effect of making his translator feel occasionally "Strauss-sick". She commented at one point: "The last hundred pages have certainly been totally uninteresting to me, considered as matter for translation. Strauss has inevitably anticipated in the earlier part of his work all the principles and many of the details of his criticism, and he seems to have fagged himself."¹² However Eliot's reading of German philosophical and biblical critical literature was formative in her religious and literary development and cannot be underestimated. Rosemary Ashton puts it strongly: "Almost inevitably her mental shift from Evangelicalism to free-thinking was closely connected with her German reading."¹³ We shall return later to evaluate the profound influence that the translating

¹¹ *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* p.180

¹² Letter to Sara Hennell, 27 November 1847, quoted by Rosemary Ashton in *The German Idea* p.149

¹³ *The German Idea* p.149

experience had upon her perception of religion and the manner in which she chose to express it in her writing.

Our concern here is with the belief in “general resurrection” and in particular with the understanding of the concept by the English church and its worshippers during the nineteenth century when issues of faith and doubt were most intensely debated. As one example of these controversies, we shall return later to the influence of F. D. Maurice with reference to the question of the understanding of the existence of Hell or perpetual punishment.

The destination of those who have died in faith is an integral part of the theology of the Resurrection. We profess in the creeds that Jesus Christ ascended into Heaven and we have already referred to his promise in John’s gospel that his disciples will follow him to the place which he has prepared for the elect. The Apocalypse of John of Patmos provides in metaphorical terms the setting for the fulfilment of the Christian hope. The vision of the celestial city will furnish material to be developed and exploited by artists and poets who strive to express the ineffable. In literature John Bunyan’s recreation in *Pilgrim’s Progress* of the New Jerusalem, the destination of Christian at the end of his journey, owes much to the final chapters of the book of Revelation. Bunyan’s book became part of the staple reading diet of many Victorian households. The manner in which he made use of the language of the apocalyptic vision was highly influential and carried over into nineteenth century novels. In painting too, depictions of the celestial city were to reach a climax in such works as *The Plains of Heaven* by John Martin, which, in turn, influence the perceptions of immortality and the afterlife in novels such as Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*. However, while the imagery and language of scripture is omnipresent in the arts, in the realm of theology there had taken

place many developments which were to have a profound effect upon the historical credibility of scripture and shake the foundations of the beliefs of both clergy and laity.

In the context of nineteenth century England such reassurance as Saint Paul could offer no longer sufficed for a large number of professing Christians. An example of the stark and dramatic expression of Victorian doubt is to be found in Bowling's picture: *Can these dry bones live?* We must reflect upon some of the factors that contributed to the development of the degree of doubt exemplified by this painting.

The Victorian Mindset

Introduction

At certain periods in history a stimulus has spurred on scholars and scientists to attempt to achieve massive strides in knowledge and understanding of the universe and its origins. At some stages developments of thought appear to come about slowly, at others they are accelerated by discoveries which cast a new light upon previous perceptions. Renaissance man, for example, appeared to burst forth from the straitjacket of mediaeval scholasticism and to shake the foundations of contemporary understanding of a three-tier universe and a flat earth with a limited horizon. Humanist thinkers like Erasmus revived interest in classical thought and provided greater scope and inspiration for literature and art.

The Catholic Church, which saw itself as representing the continued presence of Christ's body upon earth, was slow to accept the pace of change. Having expanded from its primitive beginnings into a highly organised community with a powerful hierarchy, it demonstrated a natural reluctance for any development which would disturb the status quo. It took the upheaval of the Reformation to bring about a critical self-examination of the Catholic Church and removal of some abuses, although it restated its doctrines in a largely unchanged, albeit clarified, form at the Council of Trent. At the same time

there was occasion for great personal grief to some who had set out with no intention of abandoning their original church but had truly sought reform. Meanwhile the new Protestant Church came into being with severe birth pangs in its efforts to establish for itself a convincing and authentic Christian identity. The religious struggles and civil wars, which ensued in Britain and in continental Europe, sapped energy and vitality for a while from much artistic creative initiative. The physical results of this period of unrest can also be seen in the destruction or removal of many of the symbolic aids to worship and artefacts of the mediaeval Catholic Church. By the nineteenth century the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church sought to recover much of what had been sacrificed at the Reformation in order to restore beauty and harmony to worship. This tendency, in its turn, provoked severe malaise among those who foresaw what they interpreted as a return to idolatrous forms of worship, and this fear served to set them against the would-be innovators.

The relationship between church and state was an age-old problem, which had resurfaced many times during the history of Christianity. When Emperor Constantine accorded Christianity official status and thus allied it to politics, in the words of John McManners, “he had carried through a huge religious and social revolution.”¹⁴ The door was thrown open for exploitation by the rulers and church leaders of subsequent generations, as they wrestled for power. Churchmen of a more ascetic and unworldly stamp endeavoured at different times to redress the balance and curb the excesses of those who sought to gain power through religious domination. In England, the fact that, as a result of Henry VIII’s break with Rome, the Apostolic Succession could no longer be reliably traced back by the Anglican Church, was a matter of deep concern to all who professed to believe in “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” The founders of the

¹⁴ *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* p.61

Oxford Movement found themselves in the 1830s profoundly anxious about the contemporary status of their church and spoke out accordingly.

Alarmed at the widening gulf between Christianity and the modern state, they tried in *Tracts for the Times* (1833-41) to revive faith in the Anglican Church as a divine institution, maintained in truth by the episcopal succession;¹⁵

John Keble, preaching in 1833 at the moment when the British government was contemplating suppressing ten Irish bishoprics, addressed the University Church of Saint Mary the Virgin at Oxford in these words:

After all, the surest way to uphold or restore our endangered Church, will be for each of her anxious children, in his own place and station, to resign himself more thoroughly to his God and Saviour in those duties, public and private, which are not immediately affected by the emergencies of the moment: the daily and hourly duties, I mean, of piety, purity, charity, justice.¹⁶

The appeal is to the individual and goes on to recommend circumspect behaviour, vigilance and earnestness in prayer. Newman regarded this sermon as the *point de départ* of the Oxford Movement. He was just embarking upon the radical reappraisal of his own theology, which would ultimately lead him and some significant followers back to Rome. We shall consider this aspect later in the light of the spiritual anguish experienced by Newman and his contemporaries, although some found other solutions to their problem.

One such remedy was to be found in the pious devotional Anglican tradition which matured and responded to a national pastoral emergency in the seventeenth century. When the dust of war, both civil and religious, had settled at last in England,

¹⁵ *Oxford Movement*, article in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* p.422

¹⁶ “*National Apostasy*” sermon preached on Sunday 14 July 1833

a need arose for calm reappraisal and the setting forth of a theology which would influence and motivate people's lives and prepare them for all eventualities and ultimately for a Christian death. It is from these roots that the reassuring brand of pastoral Anglican theology emerges which became the hallmark of Jeremy Taylor. The "good death" which ideally should befall the Christian was linked inextricably with the recipe for living a godly life. Taylor made a study of both the art of living and of dying, and his description of the *ars moriendi* was one that would reach the height of its influence and popularity in the particular circumstances of the Victorian period. Earthly life was seen as a pilgrimage through the temptations and tribulations of this physical world towards the goal of Heaven, for which all should strive in the hope of attaining immortal life.

This image was reinforced in a more dramatic context by the profoundly influential work from the Puritan writer, John Bunyan. His pilgrims abandoned the *City of Destruction* for the eternal bliss of the *Celestial City*, which was to provide for Victorian readers the contrast between this Vale of Woe and that Fairer Place which lies beyond. His imaginative evocation of the world of *Vanity Fair* epitomised the empty nature of earthly existence. William Makepeace Thackeray adopted the chapter heading *Vanity Fair* as the title of his own novel. For him it epitomised "a set of people living without God in the world."¹⁷ Other writers made use of Bunyan's inspiration in different ways. The American novelist, Louisa M. Alcott, constructed *Little Women* upon the framework of the allegory. At the same time she indicated that Bunyan's book was the ideal guidebook for the practice of the Christian faith.

The Enlightenment period, which intervened between the writings of Taylor and Bunyan and the Victorian period, aroused some disturbing religious doubts as well as

¹⁷ *Letters and Private Papers* ed. G. N. Ray, vol. II p.309

social unrest. Towards the end of the eighteenth century there came revolutionary stirrings from across the Channel allied to the literary exhortations of Voltaire and Rousseau whose thought-provoking works received much popular acclaim. There was a new brand of independent humanist thinking with an emphasis upon encyclopaedic knowledge and the emergence of a more critical approach to biblical scholarship. Just as pagan writers had attempted to deconstruct the gospels, eighteenth century critics like Reimarus, promoted by Lessing, were producing challenging evidence that caused people to take a fresh look at the bible and to question scriptural inerrancy.

One factor was the new understanding of anthropology. The pre-Enlightenment attitude is described in the following terms by A. O. Dyson:

Until the eighteenth century most of the great, and tenaciously persisting, doctrinal systems took for granted dogmas about human beings being based jointly on scriptural propositions and Graeco-Roman philosophical categories.¹⁸

The enquiring and critical environment of the Enlightenment period changed this perception for all time. The bible was no longer the unchallenged source but had to be set against the background of other literary historical texts from different cultures. The interpretation of a great part of Scripture as myth had changed its status for scholars and opened the way for more objective study. Elinor Shaffer speaks of “the new harmonisation of the Bible with other mythologies that emerged from the struggle between the claims of a scientific scholarship and the claims of traditional religion.”¹⁹ In particular the fundamental shift in theological anthropology has had permanent implications for the way in which we set about any investigation.

A. O. Dyson explains the sea-change in approach as follows:

¹⁸ *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* p.23

¹⁹ ‘Kubla Khan’ and the Fall of Jerusalem p.7 Introduction

Instead of rehearsing a comprehensive and rounded theological anthropology already supplied from a revealed and authoritative source, it is now more a case of setting what we know about humankind from many sources in a theological perspective which seeks to provide it with final depth and meaning.²⁰

The Victorian Frame of Mind²¹

The nineteenth century faced a dilemma. On the one hand there were new and exciting discoveries in the field of science, notably in biology and geology. Gillian Beer remarks, for example, that “Darwin’s theories profoundly *unsettled* the organising principle of much Victorian thinking.” However she goes on to say that “it is all the more worth registering therefore, the extent to which the relations of structures in his work initially share common concerns, and draw on orderings of experience learnt from other writers of the time.”²² Thus there was a sympathetic environment for the reception of radical ideas expressed in a familiar idiom.

There was also a revival of interest in antiquity generated by interest in travel and the study of archaeology. At the same time there was a perceived need for stability and retention of family values in a society which was to take its lead from Queen Victoria, her husband and her ministers.

Clergymen, as arguably the best educated members of society, broadened their horizon and moved out of their cloister or study to embrace such interests as Geology and Natural History. There was a great fascination in collecting and classifying fossils, for example. Historically speaking, the Rev. Dr. Henry Duncan, of Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire, the restorer of the ancient Ruthwell Cross, set the trend about 1824 when

²⁰ *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* p.24

²¹ From the Title of Walter Houghton’s book

²² *Darwin’s Plots* p.47

he received for study a slab of red sandstone indented with a set of fossil footprints. His work was developed by Rev. William Buckland, Professor of Geology at Oxford, whose imaginative reconstruction of the conditions needed for the creation and survival of the footprints involved an experiment with live tortoises walking on a dough-like substance. The footprints were considered to be reptilian and to date from “all of 135 million years ago.”²³ Discoveries of this degree of antiquity undermined the traditional acceptance of Creation and biblical historicity more radically than on previous occasions when apologists had been able to refute evidence by superior arguments and appeal to a more amenable audience.

Owen Chadwick maintains that scholarship within the Church remained conservative until well on in the century and failed to keep pace with the developments that had taken place on the Continent. These had already been seized upon and interpreted by secular scholars and those of less orthodox religious persuasion.

Until the sixties the Bible had not received accurate examination. Most of England assumed without inquiry that the Bible was still true as history, even if educated England was abandoning the precise accuracy of the earlier parts of Genesis.²⁴

Consequently Elinor Shaffer speaks of “George Eliot’s boredom with the belated furore”²⁵ when more lethargic minds than hers became aware of what was happening in the domain of biblical criticism.

The real life clergymen were transposed into literature and became influential in their attitudes. In some cases the theologian managed to preserve his pastoral work and his extraneous scholarship in watertight compartments. George Eliot’s Rev. Camden Farebrother in *Middlemarch* succeeds in enjoying his entomological studies and

²³ *Fossil Footprints*, Royal Scottish Museum (Leaflet 9) printed in Scotland by HMSO

²⁴ *The Victorian Church* p.57

²⁵ ‘Kubla Khan’ and the Fall of Jerusalem. Note p.344

collection of fossils in a pleasantly dilettante manner which has little bearing on his day-to-day pastoral experience. In other cases this was an impossibility and there resulted a clash of ideas which made the minister become prey to nagging doubt and disorientated him fundamentally so that his whole life and work were affected and undermined. Such a literary example is Robert Elsmere.

With Elsmere, as with all men of religious temperament, belief in Christianity and faith in God had not at the outset been a matter of reasoning at all, but of sympathy, feeling, association, daily experience. Then the intellect had broken in and destroyed or transformed the belief in Christianity.

Mary Augusta Ward's solution of seeking refuge in a species of Unitarian religion was not one for universal application.

But after the crash, *faith* emerged as strong as ever, only craving to make a fresh peace, a fresh compact with reason.²⁶

Elsmere, of course, represented an extreme example of the intellectual and spiritual problems of prominent historical figures. The nature of the dilemma may have differed but the result was the undermining of the Anglican Church as an institution and the apostasy of several leading figures. There were those who followed John Henry Newman's lead and sought the resolution of their angst in the certainty and authority of the old Church, which perceived itself alone as the true successor of Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Samuel Wilberforce, who saw his three brothers and his brother-in-law Henry Manning embrace the Catholic faith, lamented that this was no solution to ravaging doubt but merely the application of a panacea. His pain was all the greater when he reflected the original united intent of the brothers:

“of four who at one altar vowed to serve.”²⁷

²⁶ *Robert Elsmere*, Volume 3 p.39

²⁷ Sonnet written in Milan 1851

Samuel's own view of the role of the clergyman was more pragmatic than that of his tormented brothers. He eventually found refuge in a *via media*, which could adapt to a changing situation and earned for him from his detractors the nickname of "Soapy Sam." Newman, for his part, made a point of criticising the complacent element in the Anglican doctrine promulgated at Oxford. He condemns any semblance of compromise and puts into the mouth of Carlton, a Church of England tutor, the words: "Our business is to make the best of things."²⁸

However, much of Wilberforce's measured pastoral theology drew upon the tradition represented by Jeremy Taylor whose moderate and restrained tone he found congenial. As early as 1838 he resorted to direct quotation from Taylor to support his appeal to God's abundant mercy, when he responded to Pusey's over-emphasis upon the fearfulness of post-baptismal sin.

Hear the words of Bishop Taylor: "it is an uneasy pusillanimity and fond suspicion of God's goodness, to fear that our repentance shall be rejected, even although we have committed the greatest or the most of evils."²⁹

Samuel Wilberforce saw himself as an active encourager and sustainer of the faith of his people. Consequently his definition of the role of a bishop, or indeed of any clergyman worthy of his salt, was expressed in the following terms:

"a partner of your labours, a sharer of your griefs, a lightener of your anxieties, a helper of your joy."³⁰

David Newsome comments:

Although he remained staunchly in the framework of the Anglican Church, his concern with the welfare of his congregation put him in sympathy with those whose position was more radical.³¹

²⁸ *Loss and Gain* p.203

²⁹ S. Wilberforce, *Six Sermons*, 53

³⁰ *A Charge delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of Oxford at his Primary Visitation, September, October 1848* (1848) 19

³¹ *The Parting of Friends* p.183

The more radical, socially concerned clergymen, like F. D. Maurice, who adopted with Charles Kingsley a brand of Christian Socialism, tended to spend their energies, as Elsmere did, in ministering to the needs of the working classes. They took upon themselves the task of supporting the workers in their struggle to have their voices heard and to achieve a position of human worth in a society whose rigorous class system was still in place. The working classes were seen as the essential but expendable tools for the realisation of the grandiose schemes which were consistent with the creation of a great colonial power and world leader in the nineteenth century. Newman sees the downside of the urge towards greatness. He writes of:

That low ambition which sets everyone on the look-out to succeed and to rise in life, to amass money, to gain power, to depress his rivals, to triumph over his hitherto superiors, to affect a consequence and a gentility which he had not before.³²

The watchword of the age was progress. The movers and shakers of the period encouraged the Queen and government in empire building. In Britain itself communications and transport were to be improved. The building of railways figures prominently in literature, reflecting the concerns of the age. Walter Houghton refers to the dual aspect of the age, characterised by destruction and reconstruction. Many people dreaded the effects of the advent of the railway and viewed it in negative terms as the cutting up of green farmland and countryside. This is illustrated in a significant confrontation in *Middlemarch* between haymakers and railway surveyors, the former armed with pitchforks and prepared to vent their wrath on the latter. The reasonable tone of Caleb Garth defuses a potentially inflammatory situation:

³² *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 8, no.11,159 (1836)

Now, my lads, you can't hinder the railroad: it will be made whether you like it or not ---- It may do a bit of harm here and there, to this and to that; and so does the sun in heaven. But the railway's a good thing.³³

The inauguration of this new age also heralds an acceleration of the tempo of life in general. The gentle jog in the stagecoach at 12mph is increased to a startling 50mph on a train journey. This obviously makes a dramatic impact upon the prevailing mood of the period, summed up by Thackeray's concise statement: "We are of the age of steam."³⁴ Houghton speaks also of "the anxiety to be in time" which was experienced once more effective communications had been established. The deleterious effects of the new lifestyle upon health are also chronicled, notably the increase in heart disease between 1851 and 1870 recorded by W. R. Greg in an article entitled *Life at High Pressure*.³⁵ Bulwer Lytton, on the other hand, sees the contemporary advances in more positive terms and reminds the reader that it was "also an age of preparation and construction."³⁶

However progressive industrialisation brought with it disadvantages as the population shifted from country to town in search of work, and communities disintegrated and lost their essential soul. In the words of Walter Houghton:

With the break-up of a long established order and the resulting fragmentation of both society and thought, the old ties were snapped, and men became acutely conscious of separation. They felt isolated by dividing barriers; lonely for a lost companionship, human and divine; nostalgic for an earlier world of country peace and unifying belief.³⁷

³³ *Middlemarch* Chapter 56 p.620

³⁴ "De Juventate" (1860), published in *The Roundabout Papers, Works 12*, p.232

³⁵ Article in *Literary and Social Judgments*, 2, 272

³⁶ *England and the English* p.281

³⁷ *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-70*

Later in the century, as writers looked back on the effects of the period of change, the town came to be demonised and described as the source of evil and unhappiness. James Thomson's poem, *The City of Dreadful Night*, provides an extreme example of this kind of writing.

**The city is of Night; perchance of Death,
But certainly of Night; for never there
Can come the lucid morning's fragrant breath
After the dewy dawning's cold grey air.**

Thomson goes on to describe the sleepless night as "termless hell." As he was an alcoholic, his view may well be darker than that of most of his contemporaries, but it serves to underline the pessimistic vision of the urban wilderness which emerges to some degree in other works of the period, notably in Dickens.

All these factors are amply illustrated in nineteenth century literature. For some authors they merely provide a backdrop to a more intimate character-centred story. For others the events and developments of the period constitute the motivating force and inspiration for both plot and characters. The more powerful characters are those whose actions appear to shape the destiny of others, although they too are subject to mortal decay and collapse. One such case would be George Eliot's hypocritical Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*, who loses all credibility when his sins are brought to light. The weaker members of society are the victims who invoke the reader's sympathetic understanding and who often demonstrate in their death the Christian reversal of the order of society when the last shall be first and the first last. Where does faith come into all this? How does the church cope with the changing circumstances of the Victorian age where belief trembles on the quicksands?

Doubt and the Victorians

By the nineteenth century the theology which had influenced the clergymen of the Anglican Church and had been passed on to their educated laity was very often that epitomised by the seventeenth century cleric Jeremy Taylor to whom we have already alluded. In Victorian times *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* had become part of the staple spiritual reading matter of many a middle class or aristocratic household. For example we read that William Gladstone was familiar with treatises upon the good death, including that of Jeremy Taylor. Likewise the family of Archibald Tait, Archbishop of Canterbury, was one that suffered severely from premature bereavement and derived strength and comfort from Taylor's writings.³⁸ By extension his works also exerted an influence upon the fictional characters of novelists of the period, for example, upon the creations of George Eliot.

The emphasis on eschatology in Taylor's writing adapted well to a society which had to come to terms with a high mortality rate in a country headed by a monarch who remained in a constant state of mourning after her husband's death in 1861. Nevertheless Taylor's main preoccupation is not with sudden deaths which are deemed to be unfortunate, since the best that can be achieved in such cases is a hasty deathbed repentance, which is a poor substitute for pastoral preparation for death. John McManners transposes this doctrine into practical terms in the eighteenth century context when, he says:

---the clergy by common consent had the social role of exhorting their flocks to practical action in preparation for death: they were expected to warn against delay in making a last will and testament, and to insist that this document was scrupulously fair to the rights of natural heirs and the reasonable expectations of loyal servants.³⁹

³⁸ Jalland, Pat: *Death in the Victorian Family* pp. 140, 165, 281 et passim.

³⁹ *Death and the Enlightenment* p.61

Although Taylor took this aspect into account, his concern was to dispose of earthly matters in order to concentrate upon the spiritual without unwelcome distractions. His theme is that a good life with sufficient time at the end for repentance and absolution is the ideal preparation for the life beyond. He presents a sort of *Nunc dimittis* situation where the dying man or woman has achieved a vision of glory and is in a state of grace, well prepared to take leave of this world. Taylor propounds the view that this present world is, after all, a place of vanity and woe and that Christians will be much happier in the next life. This notion will provide fruitful territory for writers like Mrs. Henry Wood who will stress in novels such as *East Lynne* the contrast between the vale of woe and the much fairer place which lies beyond.

The moderate tone in which Jeremy Taylor advances his theology appealed to the strand of opinion in the Anglican Church which sought the *via media* and studiously avoided all extremes. In Taylor's case this attitude may well have been engendered by the years of civil war and bitter differences on both the political and religious front during the period of Charles I and of Oliver Cromwell. There was need for a calm perspective and cool appraisal to soothe a bruised and troubled church and its followers at the end of the Protectorate. Edmund Gosse, writing of Jeremy Taylor in 1903, suggests that the object of the latter's sermons was "really to apply medicine to the morbid nerves of his age."⁴⁰

The same theology answers a different need in the nineteenth century, for the picture has changed greatly. There have been scientific and scholarly developments, and in the wake of the Enlightenment there has arisen a climate of scepticism, which affects clergy, scholars and writers. As far as the general populace is concerned, there has been

⁴⁰ *Jeremy Taylor* p.164

a drift of thousands from the slower pace of the countryside to the industrial activity of the cities. People find themselves herded together and the tradition of the local parish where the same families have lived, worshipped and died for generations is in process of being lost. Obviously this development calls for a shift of emphasis in the pastoral role and for an appreciation of altered circumstances. We must ask how the clergy coped and also how they were perceived to deal with new problems.

A priest is never more thoroughly a priest than in the chamber of death⁴¹

Thus writes Charles Reade in *The Cloister and the Hearth*. If it is true that the essential function of the clergyman is to minister to the dying, then it is surely in the contemporary perception of the theology of death that we should seek the true reflection of the faith of the age.

If doubt lay at the very heart of the words of committal in the Funeral Service, this meant that the whole basis of the Christian faith was undermined and had to be re-examined in an attempt to identify some kernel of certainty on which to build. As we shall see, doubt took a hold on all conditions of humanity. Despite external signs of devotion to religion, the interest in building large churches ostensibly to cope with the influx to the cities, and the concern with erecting impressive monuments to the dead, there were also signs of disintegration and fragmentation in the Anglican Church and its sisters. Factual historical accounts and literary comment indicate the inadequacy of traditional theology to deal with the problems of an age that felt that it had outgrown the unquestioning acceptance of orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless the language of Christianity and especially that of the King James Bible continues to reverberate and find expression in the work of Victorian writers. The religious metaphor is more than ever in evidence and colours the writing of many poets and novelists who no longer

⁴¹ *The Cloister and the Hearth* p.694

profess orthodox Christianity. As we shall see later, it is in fact frequently the doubters who employ the images of Christianity to greatest effect.

In art and architecture in particular the Victorian age harked back to the mediaeval period in the Gothic Revival, apparent in some of the newly built city churches. The preoccupation with the Middle Ages had also found its outlet in Romanticism, but the role of religion had undergone a vital change during the intervening centuries. In the mediaeval period religion had been part and parcel of most everyday activities. Johan Huizinga speaks of “a constant blending of spheres of holy and profane thought” which led to “an enormous unfolding of religion in daily life.”⁴²

In nineteenth century England there is such a powerful preoccupation with many facets of religion that, at first glance, a reader unfamiliar with the reality of the contemporary situation might well be deluded into thinking that Christianity was alive and well. It would appear to be thriving in an age characterised by the external trappings of religion. The countless new churches would seem to bear witness to preoccupation with religion and provision for the increased city population. As whole households, like their masters, were perceived to be Christian on the analogy of those of Cornelius and Lydia under the influence of the first apostles, one has to penetrate beneath the surface to identify the doubts and differences that beset thinking individuals.

Within the clergy itself there were, of course, great debates about the perception of Heaven and Hell. Both the fundamental idea of life after death and the notion of divine punishment in Hell become the subject of heated discussion. These questions emerge prominently in the writings and sermons of F. D. Maurice, whose essays debated the issues vehemently. Was banishment to Hell, separation from God to be an everlasting punishment? Maurice agonised over the nature of the NT word αἰώνιος and

⁴² *The Waning of the Middle Ages* p.147

suggested that it referred to a quality of life, not to an endless time. Was there then hope at the end of this condemnation to outer darkness? Geoffrey Rowell states Maurice's position in 1850 as follows:

Those who rejected God would indeed suffer punishment, but the heaviest punishment the wicked man could expect was 'that the state should continue, that he should be alienated from goodness and truth,' for to be in such a state was 'to be in the deepest pit of hell.'⁴³

Maurice could not come up with a cogent, logical argument, and Owen Chadwick points out that, at the next moment, "he [Maurice] was observed to be still teaching atonement in Christ and the possibility of endless death."⁴⁴ If it were demonstrated that Maurice did not subscribe consistently to the doctrine of everlasting punishment, he risked losing his Divinity chair at King's College. The motion for dismissal from Bishop Blomfield accused Maurice of "teaching a dangerous doctrine for the future punishment of the wicked." The threat of eternal damnation was seen as the only truly effective moral sanction to maintain social order. As such it emerges frequently on the lips of clergymen and Victorian fathers, both in real life situations and in literary contexts, seeking to discipline children by a 'carrot and stick' theology. On the other hand, his more open-ended theology held a definite popular appeal. The submission of 960 working men (27 December 1853) claimed "that he had given a more liberal, merciful and genial interpretation to the Holy Scriptures than was usually given to them."⁴⁵ According to Rowell, Maurice's eschatology depended ultimately upon "the final consummation of the relationship with God, in which man existed."⁴⁶ Hell

⁴³ *Hell and the Victorians* p.80, with reference to F. D. Maurice, *The Church a family* (1850)

⁴⁴ *The Victorian Church II* p.545

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.549

⁴⁶ *Hell and the Victorians* p.89

represented the negative side of this; “it was the failure to recognise where the true fulfilment of human nature was to be found.”⁴⁷

There are also signs of dissatisfaction with the need to subscribe to other doctrines contained in the Thirty-nine Articles. This factor and other religious scruples contribute to the defection to Rome from the Anglican Church of such luminaries as Newman, Manning and all but one of the Wilberforce brothers.

There is also the emergence of a more critical attitude towards clergymen in general from both inside and outside the acknowledged Christian community. Some writers, notably Kingsley and Dickens, promote social reform in their novels and expose the inadequacies of so-called Christian society. In so doing they focus on the plight of the poor and under-privileged. Christian Socialism finds its expression in Kingsley’s novel *Alton Locke*. The author, however, is not solely concerned with social critique and transcends the genre, for his novel finishes with a vision of the Promised Land which the principal character, like Moses, is destined to contemplate but never reach. This image of the Pisgah Sight is one to which we shall return, for it features in different guises in the works of other authors of the period. It emphasises the problematic nature of any attempt to envision what lies beyond the grave.

As for the portrayal of the clergyman himself in literature, one encounters a wide variety of approaches. There are some, like George Eliot’s Rev. Edward Tryan in *Janet’s Repentance*, who seem to be fulfilling their mission at great personal cost and end up by making a Christlike sacrifice. There are others who become the butt of fierce criticism and stand accused of undermining the faith of those who most need pastoral care and reassurance amidst the crises of life. Of these latter types we meet supreme examples in the works of Thomas Hardy. The range that we shall try to examine will

⁴⁷ *Hell and the Victorians* p.89

stretch from the black despair expressed in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure* to the ironic accounts by Anthony Trollope of the supposed machinations of some representatives of the Anglican clergy. The complex attitude of George Eliot will also come into the discussion, as her clergymen are painted with subtle brush strokes which fill out the character and remind us that clergymen are first and foremost human beings, subject to the same failings and suffering as any layman.

Let us consider then, as one aspect of our discussion, to what extent the established church is tried and found guilty for the apparent falling off of faith and the decline of Christianity. We shall concern ourselves mainly with Anglican clergymen, since they play a major role both historically and in literature. The chroniclers and writers of the period will serve as prosecutors and defenders, and we, the reading public, must perforce become the jury. We shall concentrate on the relationship between the popular perception of Christian death in the nineteenth century and the role of the clergy in upholding the living and in ministering to the dying and the bereaved as interpreted by contemporary writers.

Chapter 2: Anthony Trollope

The Church as an institution—Situational Ethics—Enough to try the patience of a saint.

In his introduction to *The Warden*, Owen Chadwick confronts the problem of the perception that Trollope's treatment of church and clergy is superficial. He cites the work of Mrs. Humphry Ward at the other end of the spectrum as being an extreme example of the clergyman's faith-dilemma in an age when the tensions between traditional theology and scientific knowledge had apparently reached crisis point. Trollope is too easily perceived in the guise of the facetious narrator who represents his clerical contemporaries as caricatures and leaves it at that.

Chadwick maintains that Trollope's writing is anything but superficial. It is simply that we are dealing with a different genre. His portrayal of the church involves a shift in emphasis from the agonising faith-dilemma of the tormented soul to the malaise engendered by the imperfections of the church itself as an institution. Trollope's novels present us with situations in which the individual clergyman finds himself faced with a problem, which develops into a moral dilemma for him and has repercussions affecting church and society. Chadwick concedes that Trollope may not agonise with his characters "in coils of faith and doubt and scepticism"⁴⁸, as does Mrs. Humphry Ward. However he goes on to say:

Though the interest of Trollope was not there, yet it rested in a field no less important and certainly not superficial, that is, in the relationship of the individual to moral conduct when he or she is entangled in the toils of public institutions.⁴⁹

Chadwick is not blind to Trollope's deficiencies as a writer. For example, he acknowledges the breach of good taste in *The Warden*, where the author makes use of

⁴⁸ *The Warden* Introduction p.xii

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.xii

the characters of the three young sons of Archdeacon Grantly to satirise in miniature three prominent clerics of the day, the bishops of London, Exeter and Oxford, Charles James Blomfield, Henry Phillpotts and Samuel Wilberforce. It probably seemed too good an opportunity to miss, but the caricatures, while amusing, detract from the quality of the novel.

In other instances he defines the parameters within which he is working. In *Framley Parsonage*, for example, he explains:

I have written much of clergymen, but in doing so I have endeavoured to portray them as they bear on our social life rather than to describe the mode and working of their professional careers-----

There are dangers to be avoided, and of that he is well aware. He goes on to explain:

I should either have laden my fiction with sermons or I should have degraded my sermons into fiction.⁵⁰

Thus the social setting is essential, and in some of the novels the reader is obliged to wait quite a while before the clerical characters are introduced into the theatre which has been created to set the scene for an ethical dilemma.

In *Doctor Thorne*, the third of the Barsetshire novels, the county receives the benison of a biblical description as “a favoured land of Goshen”⁵¹ to its inhabitants.

However for many of the inhabitants the benefits are seen purely in material terms, and the clergy themselves are described as the antithesis of spiritual leadership,

a clerical aristocracy, which is certainly not without its due weight-----a society sufficiently powerful to be counted as something by the county squirearchy.⁵²

The class system operates to the advantage of those who are well connected, and the theme of patronage features in most of the novels, demonstrating the continuing struggle for the balance of power between church and state on one level, and, on

⁵⁰ *Framley Parsonage* chapter XLII, p.429

⁵¹ *Doctor Thorne* chapter I, p. 1

⁵² *Ibid.* p.1

another, the petty tyranny of individual patrons, who promoted their own interests in the preferments offered to their local clergy. There is a reference in the opening chapter of *The Small House at Allington* to the local system of patronage. The squires can create social difficulties for the clergy.

They had ever been steady supporters of the Church, graciously receiving into their parish such new vicars as, from time to time, were sent to them from King's College, Cambridge, to which establishment the gift of the living belonged---but, nevertheless, the Dales had ever carried on some unpronounced warfare against the clergyman, so that the intercourse between the lay family and the clerical had seldom been in all respects pleasant.⁵³

Trollope's depictions of the clergy range widely in style and in sympathetic portrayal. Sometimes we encounter a telling thumbnail sketch or a phrase that immediately indicates the type of clergyman we are about to meet. In *Doctor Thorne*, for example, our first introduction to the Rev. Caleb Oriel puts us instantly in the picture by informing us that "his original calling, as a young man, was rather to the outward and visible signs of religion than to its inward and spiritual graces."⁵⁴ Here Trollope echoes, to some extent, J. H. Newman's evocation in *Loss and Gain* of clergymen in the thirties who enthusiastically adopted High Church trappings and gestures without understanding the theological background. The author also implies that clergymen like Oriel are guilty of emptying the notion of Sacrament of its deepest meaning and of trivialising what is most sacred. Thus we are alerted to the dangers of ritualism as opposed to a genuine sense of vocation. On other occasions the author devotes a considerable section of narrative to putting across the idiosyncrasies of character and theological outlook. This is a deliberate policy to illustrate the impact of a particular brand of ecclesiology upon the church and society of the period. Archdeacon Grantly,

⁵³ *The Small House at Allington* chapter I p.3

⁵⁴ *Doctor Thorne* chapter XXXII p.350. The name cleverly evokes Oriel College, dedicated to the Virgin, and whose common room which was the heart of the original Tractarian movement.

for example, is the epitome of the Oxford High Church product. He is more concerned with churchmanship than with the pastoral role. The reader becomes familiar with the “High and Dry” concept that he stands for, as the machinations of the hierarchy take shape in the course of the novels.

Outside the context of his novels, Trollope gives us a useful insight into his understanding of the Victorian church in the short pen portraits of his *Clergymen of the Church of England*. Although this was published a decade after the first of the Barsetshire novels, it provides a helpful introduction and guide to the various types and ranks of clergymen who come to life in the novels. Some of the essays, in fact, seem to contain the embryo of the fictional characters.

In her introduction Ruth apRoberts consigns the essays to “a special category, somewhere between abstraction and realistic fiction.”⁵⁵ She goes on to interpret the reader’s reaction to them.

Because of our incurably anthropomorphic turn of mind, we can learn much of trends and tendencies through these characters—who, because they are Trollope’s, keep trying to turn real.⁵⁶

Trollope’s concern with the essentially human qualities, the virtues and foibles of his characters, provides a point of contact with another writer whom we shall discuss in a subsequent chapter, namely George Eliot, whose *Scenes of Clerical Life* stress the human frailty of the clergyman caught up in the same ordinary joys and sorrows as his fellow mortals. In the first chapter of *Barchester Towers* Trollope admonishes the reader thus:

⁵⁵ *Clergymen of the Church of England*, Introduction p. 12

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.12

If we look to our clergymen to be more than men, we shall probably teach ourselves to think that they are less, and can hardly hope to raise the character of the pastor by denying him the right to entertain the aspirations of a man.⁵⁷

The authorial voice rings out loud and clear. George Eliot will also pause to address her reader to engage sympathies, but her injunctions tend to be in a gentler yet equally insistent tone. We shall return to this later. It was George Eliot who described Trollope as “a Church of England man, clinging to whatever is, on the whole.”⁵⁸ Certainly he evokes the Erastian wing of the Church, but not uncritically, in his portrayal of the Grantly-Arabin faction, as opposed to the evangelical tendency represented by the Proudies.

G. K. Chesterton, writing in the early twentieth century, refers to the period about which Trollope is writing as “the Church in the lull between the Oxford Movement and the modern High Anglican energy”.⁵⁹ Chadwick, speaking as a historian, reminds us that Trollope was looking back and “writing about an old world just as it was changing” and that he was “acknowledging the virtues of the old world as well as the absolute necessity for change.”⁶⁰ George Eliot will put her particular stamp on the same theme when she allows herself in *Middlemarch* the perspective of thirty years to be able to view the crisis period of the thirties with some degree of detachment.

Trollope presents us with the unsympathetic radical view of the decadence of the extreme conservative wing of the Church of England as seen through the eyes of Mr. Slope, the bishop’s personal chaplain:

**The whole of our enormous Cathedral establishments have been allowed to go to sleep; ---
---nay, they are all but dead, and ready for the sepulchre.⁶¹**

⁵⁷ *Barchester Towers* chapter 1 p.8

⁵⁸ *Letters* ed. Gordon Haight (1954) pp 81-2

⁵⁹ *The Victorian Age in Literature* p.133

⁶⁰ *The Warden* Introduction p. xiii

⁶¹ *Barchester Towers* Chapter XXXII p.290

Slope certainly emerges as a character calculated to be viewed with extreme antipathy, but Trollope uses him as a mouthpiece for ideas of renewal and new life which Slope proposes to introduce by the application of “parochial energy.” Trollope does not seem to be totally opposed to this one aspect of Slope’s sermon. However his own approach is less radical, more measured, as he expounds his view of the *ecclesia reformanda*.

We are much too apt to look at schism in our church as an unmitigated evil. Moderate schism, if there may be such a thing, at any rate calls attention to the subject, draws in supporters who would otherwise have been inattentive to the matter, and teaches men to think upon religion.⁶²

What then is the role of the novelist? And how does the novelist envisage the role of the priest? Trollope gives his personal answer to the first question in his autobiography.

The novelist, if he have a conscience, must preach his sermons with the same purpose as the clergyman and must have his own system of ethics.⁶³

We shall encounter differing systems of ethics in the novels, some of which, in the eyes of the disinterested observer, are lacking in logic but strong in moral fibre. Examples of this are to be found in *The Warden* and in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, where the principal character consults neither personal convenience nor self-interest but causes great trouble to others in his self-imposed martyrdom.

The final essay in *Clergymen of the Church of England* breaks the mould of the other short generalised sketches in order to deal with a specific dilemma in the changing environment of nineteenth century theology. *The Clergyman who subscribes for Colenso* reflects the tension between traditional belief and the new way of thinking which emerged in more progressive theologians as a result of the impact of scientific discoveries and historical biblical criticism. On the one hand we have the old rector with his implicit belief in the creeds, the thirty-nine articles and the inerrancy of the Bible “to

⁶² *Barchester Towers* Chapter XX p.160

⁶³ *Autobiography*, Chapter 12, p.143

be taken entire, unmutilated and unquestioned.”⁶⁴ The new parson betrays a touch of latent irony. He, for his part, has accepted the geological findings and is convinced that we should abandon belief in the six day Creation and in Noah’s Flood. The traditional imagery of sea and ships is employed with telling effect, as the writer realises that the new preacher has finally “cut the rope which bound his bark to the old shore, and that he is going out to sea in quest of a better land.”⁶⁵

The question is this: Should one follow the new teaching and make the same desperate move? The writer describes the new doctrines as “ill-defined,” and yet so persuasive have been the arguments of the new parson, accompanied by that “subrisive smile”, that the flock reluctantly follow. The old beliefs and the old ways are familiar and well-loved, and it takes a supreme effort of will to abandon them.

With hands outstretched towards the old places, with sorrowing hearts,---with hearts which still love the old teachings which the mind will no longer accept---

In this sorrowful state the followers of the new order take the irreversible step.

---we, too, cut our ropes, and go out in our little boats, and search for a land that will be new to us, though how far new,--new in how many things, we do not know. Who would not stay behind if it were possible to him? ⁶⁶

Here we may well identify Trollope’s own note of nostalgia for the old certainties. Although in his novels he indulges in a more down to earth discourse concerning the old and the new, the pain of separation from past values comes over just as keenly in Septimus Harding’s attachment to the traditional forms of the liturgy and the style of presentation.

⁶⁴ *Clergymen of the Church of England* p. 126

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.128

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* pp.128-9

Harding has a degree of ambivalence, for his actual function within the church as precentor of the cathedral is purely liturgical. His role as warden of Hiram's Hospital is practically a sinecure, but he has invested the post with a spiritual quality appreciated only by the faithful John Bunce. Furthermore his unselfish concern for others fits him for the priestly role. Owen Chadwick sees in Mr. Harding "a portrait of a contemplative."⁶⁷ If he had only taken the vow of celibacy, he would resemble "a prayerful monk of the most sincere kind." However this quiet, devout man has the added dimension of fatherly love for his two daughters, whose interests are dear to him and involve him in contact with a more worldly community. Louis Rataboul points out in the *avant-propos* to his book that the situation of the Anglican clergyman presents a degree of ambivalence, since he is often portrayed as a family man. On the one hand this invests him with a more human aspect, but it also exposes him more readily to social criticism than his celibate Catholic counterparts.

Il paraît sans doute plus humain, mais aussi plus exposé que le prêtre Catholique aux jugements et aux critiques de la société qui l'entoure. ⁶⁸

We are given a generous insight into Mr. Harding's minor faults and conceits, but his inner strength and motivation do not remove him far from the ideals of the "chartre of priesthood" set out by George Herbert. This entails the duty "to do that which Christ did, after His manner, both for doctrine and for life."⁶⁹

After making the sacrifice of giving up his post of warden of Hiram's Hospital from motives of personal integrity, Mr. Harding does not completely abandon his ministry to the bedesmen, although they have signed a petition against his interests.

⁶⁷ *The Warden* Introduction p.xix

⁶⁸ *Le Pasteur Anglican dans le Roman Victorien*

⁶⁹ *A Priest to the Temple*, first printed in *Remains* (1652). Works of George Herbert, (Second Edition) C. Whitting, London (1841), Vol. I, p.4.

From him they had such consolation as a dying man may receive from his Christian pastor.⁷⁰

This task he performed out of Christian charity when it was no longer incumbent upon him to do so. However the change in status was manifest. Due to the intervention of external circumstances and mistaken perception, Harding could no longer fulfil the role which he cherished, “the constant presence of a master, a neighbour and a friend.”

In *The Warden* it is not a crisis of faith from which Mr. Harding suffers but a moral dilemma occasioned by ecclesiastical innocence in a hard, commercial world that demanded value for money. Trollope uses the contemporary affair of the Hospital of St. Cross as the basis for his first significant assault upon the Press as represented by *The Jupiter*. The unworldly clergyman finds himself caught up in the crossfire of a media campaign against financial abuses countenanced by the Church of England. Trollope demonstrates that, when the full force of ecclesiastical indignation is brought to bear upon the problem, an impasse is reached that can be resolved only by one man’s selfless and independent action. Harding solves his own ethical problem without recourse to external support but simply by personal sacrifice. In the end it is the practical goodness of the individual that emerges triumphant amidst a sea of legal and ecclesiastical argument. Chadwick contends that “the strength of Trollope’s philosophy as a writer is that he understands that human beings are a confusion of good and bad.”⁷¹ The human qualities of the clergyman are emphasised. Upon them depends the efficacy of his pastoral ministry. Therefore Trollope has no need to illustrate by sermon. The lesson is to be amply demonstrated in practical terms by the action of the individual, for better or for worse.

⁷⁰ *The Warden* p.170

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Introduction p.xx

Septimus Harding, although present in the sequels to *The Warden*, plays a less significant role. In *The Small House at Allington*, the penultimate novel of the series, he indulges in charitable reflection, as an old man, upon the wounding experiences recounted in the first volume.

And yet he had been injured—injured very deeply. Yet he can tell himself: “It was all for the best—especially as this happiness has not been denied to me of making myself at home—at the old place.”⁷²

Old age has rendered the clergyman even more unworldly and saintly. We see him through the eyes of Adolphus Crosbie, an earthy man not easily moved, who confesses that “he had never seen a face on which traits of human kindness were more plainly written.”⁷³ The verger who knows the former Warden well is driven to hyperbole in his assessment of the man. “He is of that sort that they make angels of.”⁷⁴

Mr. Harding makes brief appearances as a wise old observer of human nature in stark contrast to his more worldly descendants such as Griselda Grantly, Lady Dumbello. Although now bedridden and fairly quiescent, he makes his final and most moving impact in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. He still betrays a benign interest in the affairs of the Cathedral and is deeply concerned by the plight of the Reverend Josiah Crawley of Hogglestock, of whom we shall speak presently. In her introduction to *Barchester Towers* Ruth Rendell refers to Mr. Harding “to whom is awarded one of the finest deathbeds in nineteenth century fiction.” Here is the pattern advocated by Jeremy Taylor of the good man well prepared to encounter death and to part from this life with no regrets. He dies a patriarchal death in the presence of his family, attended by his clerical sons-in-law. He has time to reflect upon the blessings that he has enjoyed.

⁷² *The Small House at Allington* p.156

⁷³ *Ibid.* p.154

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 155

I am happy in leaving my children because they have ever been gentle to me and kind. If I am permitted to remember them whither I am going, my thoughts of this will all be pleasant. Should it not be much to them that they have made my deathbed happy?⁷⁵

Mr. Harding has to a great extent lived out the good life advocated by Jeremy Taylor as the ideal preparation for a good death. Holy living is the prerequisite for holy dying. This is the emphasis that became useful for Victorian society and allowed people to come to terms with the omnipresence of death in a progressive industrial society which took its toll on its workers. Victorian novels abound in death scenes, some with varying degrees of pathos and sentimentality which stand in contrast to the gradual, sensitively drawn passing of Septimus Harding.

Ruth Rendell remarks in an understatement that Mrs. Proudie's death was "of a different nature."⁷⁶ This contrasting death also occurs in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. Although it emerges that the bishop's domineering wife had previously experienced illness which she had kept to herself, death creeps up on her and her household unawares. There is an uncompromising description of the discovery of the corpse. Poor Mr. Thumble is the hapless witness to the shocking sight.

The body was still on its legs—the mouth was rigidly closed—the eyes were open as though staring at him.⁷⁷

Not all situations in which Trollope's clergymen find themselves concern life and death, but there are crucial problems which interfere with pastoral duties and the cure of souls. We shall not concern ourselves over much with the political machinations that facilitate various appointments to the Church of England hierarchy, and are the cause of personal triumphs and disappointments in almost equal measure. In *Barchester Towers* Archdeacon Grantly had desired earnestly to succeed his gentle father as Bishop of Barchester, but the accident of a change of government and consequent loss of Tory

⁷⁵ *The Last Chronicle of Barset* Chapter LVIII, p.565

⁷⁶ *Barchester Towers* Introduction p.xiv

⁷⁷ *The Last Chronicle* Chapter LXVI pp.649-50

patronage dashes his hopes and leaves the way clear for the less aristocratic faction represented by the Proudies who enjoy the support of the Liberals in Parliament.

In *Framley Parsonage* the young Mark Robarts' star is in the ascendant as he acquires a comfortable parsonage and then the added privilege of a prebendal stall. However Trollope is merely building up to a situation where a moral crisis will overtake the confident young cleric who sets too great a store by influential social connections. He consequently falls victim to the temptations offered by the blandishments of an unscrupulous acquaintance who nearly precipitates the clergyman's ruin. The way out of this difficulty depends upon the integrity and good nature of other friends before the imprudent parson is ready to acknowledge the truth of the stern advice offered by the upright and impecunious Reverend Josiah Crawley.

You owe it to those around you to live a godly, cleanly life—as you owe it also, in a much higher way, to your Father who is in heaven...Are you satisfied to be a castaway after you have taken upon yourself Christ's armour?⁷⁸

Robarts eventually emerges from his experience as a chastened and repentant sinner, but one who did not have to undergo the ultimate humiliation of being disgraced in the eyes of the Church or deprived of his home by the bailiffs.

With Josiah Crawley, the parson of Hoggstock, things fare decidedly worse. In *The Last Chronicle of Barset* we encounter him again still struggling to make ends meet on a meagre stipend. His wife is reduced to a harsh existence with no material resources to fall back on except those surreptitiously provided by the more affluent neighbouring clergy. Her husband's pride will not accept any proffered assistance. It is ironic that this scrupulous, sternly upright man should find himself accused of fraud and misappropriation of a cheque. A mixture of absentmindedness and a chain of coincidence expose him to the harshest of accusations. The moral struggle that he

⁷⁸ *Framley Parsonage* pp. 155, 156

undergoes is a bitter one. His uncompromising attitude leads him into even greater trouble and threatens ruin for his whole household as well as the deepest unhappiness. Here, if anywhere, do we find the proof that Trollope's concern with this most human of clergymen was anything but superficial. We plumb the depths of misery with Mr. Crawley and his family. The description of the poverty-stricken household betrays the humiliating plight of an intellectual cleric demeaned by the unfair system of allocating stipends. "There was no light in the room, and hardly a spark of fire in the grate."⁷⁹ The wretched, shabby room contains only one armchair in which Mr. Crawley huddles in his despair. The man is a scholar into the bargain, one who shared his student days with Dean Arabin. Now he possesses only the remnant of some dog-eared classics from which he educates his eldest daughter. This stands in cruel contrast to the fine libraries enjoyed by Doctor Arabin and Archdeacon Grantly. Again it is only by the intervention of honourable friends who prove convincingly to Crawley that he has committed no wrong, that the situation is saved and the proud man can hold up his head once more.

The ethical dilemmas in which Trollope involves his characters serve to emphasise their strengths and weaknesses in face of adversity and to prove beyond doubt that clergymen are equally as prone to temptation as any ordinary mortal. We have referred to the Reverend Francis Arabin, who was to become Dean of Barchester. In him we encounter an interesting study of a quieter, more studious style of clergyman, one who will become dear to Septimus Harding, although he does not aspire to the same degree of saintliness. In *Barchester Towers* we learn that Arabin has passed through a time of trial during which he experienced the inclination to follow Newman's road to Rome. His was a troubled mind and soul, but he eventually found peace and guidance

⁷⁹ *The Last Chronicle of Barset* Chapter IV p.28

under the influence of a Cornish curate who imparted to him a true understanding of his faith. The lesson he learned was that

the highest laws in the governance of a Christian's duty must act from within and not from without; that no man can become a serviceable servant solely by obedience to written edicts; and that the safety that he was about to seek within the gates of Rome was no other than the selfish freedom from personal danger which the bad soldier attempts to gain who counterfeits illness on the eve of battle.⁸⁰

Here was a lesson worthy of the pen of Samuel Wilberforce who would have used it as an argument to stay the hand of his brothers. The effect on the gentle Arabin was that "from that time forth he put his shoulder to the wheel, as a clergyman of the Church for which he had been educated." Here is the *via media*, which Taylor had advocated and by which Samuel Wilberforce himself sought to operate.

The special quality which emerged in Arabin and which endeared him to his future father-in-law Septimus Harding was his humility. This new attitude had been acquired during his spiritual trial and had wrought a permanent change in his whole being. This is perhaps the nearest approach in the Barchester novels to the type of spiritual crisis described in the more overtly spiritual novels of the period. We note, however, that it takes place discreetly offstage or as part of the *Vorgeschichte* instead of occupying a prominent part of the novel. It also has resonances of the flight to Rome of those who found the Church of England inadequate for their spiritual guidance. When Arabin is speaking to Eleanor, Mr. Harding's daughter and his own future wife, he conjures up a prophetic vision of an age which betokens the eschaton.

Peace on earth and goodwill among men, are like heaven, promises for the future—When that prophecy is accomplished, there will no longer be any need for clergymen.⁸¹

⁸⁰ *Barchester Towers* p.160

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 175-6

In one of Trollope's later books *The Way we live now* the role of the clergy has become peripheral. They make only rare appearances to comment on the mores of the time. In a recent television dramatisation, which stressed the more sensational aspects of the book, the Bishop of Elmham and his fellow clerics had more or less disappeared. The Catholic priest Father Barham underlines the ineffectiveness of some members of the comfortable Anglican clergy with their lack of practical succour for those in need.

**Your people never go to a clergyman in their distress. It's the last thing they'd think of—
But with us the poor know where to look for sympathy.**

The bishop tries, on another occasion, to press home a positive point on behalf of his confession.

We build churches much faster than we used to do.

His purpose is frustrated by the squire, Roger Carbury, who quickly responds with a pertinent question.

Do we say our prayers in them when we have built them? ⁸²

We are given a fairly comprehensive account of this late Victorian bishop, representing the trend in the seventies. On the credit side we learn that:

Among the poor he was idolised.—He was an unselfish man, who loved his neighbour as himself, and forgave all trespass, and thanked God for his daily bread from his heart, and prayed heartily to be delivered from temptation. ⁸³

However Trollope criticises the man for his lack of theological credibility and competence, for he goes on to comment

But I doubt whether he was competent to teach a creed—or even to hold one, if it be necessary that a man should understand and define his creed before he can hold it.

It was thus that he was perceived as a model bishop only “by such clergy of his diocese as were not enthusiastic in their theology whether on one side or on the other.” This

⁸² *The Way we live now* Vol. 2 p.320

⁸³ *Ibid.* Vol. 1 p.148

demonstrates the negative side of middle-of-the-road theology perceived as compromise.

We are left in this later book with a diluted profession of Salvation earned by works.

I suppose men will go to heaven, my Lord, by doing as they would be done by.

This comes from the mouth of the Squire, who is viewed as a man of principle and speaks in terms of stewardship of his domain and responsibility to those who have preceded him and those who will come after. Stewardship implies an ethical stance. Carbury tells us that the duties have a quasi-religious significance for him. "These things are to me very holy."⁸⁴ Thus we are no longer in the presence of a truly spiritual dimension, although a high degree of integrity is implied.

Anthony Trollope who wrote so much about clergymen concentrates, as we remarked earlier, upon their human qualities. He also stresses the fact that the clergymen of the nineteenth century were still essentially 'gentlemen', echoing Hurrell Froude's notion of the 'gentleman heresy.' Even the impoverished Crawley is described in such terms by his colleagues, with whom this quality carried more weight than his scholarship and his essential spirituality. This was a familiar concept. David Newsome quotes Charles Smyth:

The nineteenth century ideal of a resident gentleman in holy orders in every parish...was, because of this element of class-consciousness, subtly different from the determination of James I "to have a resident Moyses in everye parish."⁸⁵

Trollope's dean and archdeacon belong to the clerisy, the highly educated tradition of Oxford gentleman cleric. This gentlemanly aspect is seized upon by Louis Rataboul, who remarks in his study of Victorian clergymen of the Church of England:

En fin de compte, on ne peut être un vrai clergyman sans être un gentleman.

He goes even further in general terms.

⁸⁴*The Way we live now* Vol. 2 p.472-3

⁸⁵ *The Parting of Friends* p.70

Le clergé anglais est, et tient à rester, un clergé d'aristocratie.⁸⁶

In historical terms this tradition persisted and was ultimately partly responsible for the lack of liaison between the clergy and the city populace. Later, with more disastrous results for the church, the same culture gap and lack of sympathetic understanding alienated many of the men in the trenches in World War I. In the case of Trollope Rataboul perceives a group of clergy trapped by tradition and speaks of “ce clergé encore prisonnier du passé.”⁸⁷ However perhaps the most telling and acerbic judgment of Trollope's clergymen is that made by Chesterton in 1913.

And it is notable in the Victorian spirit once more that though his clergymen are all of them real ones and many of them good men, it never really occurs to us to think of them as priests of a religion.⁸⁸

Rataboul suggests that each one appears as a reflection of the human condition **avec sa dignité et ses faiblesses, ses rêves et ses échecs, ses joies et ses souffrances.**⁸⁹

We shall take up this theme again later with reference to George Eliot's portraits of clergymen.

With Trollope we have encountered no burning debate upon the nature of Heaven or Hell, but only internecine arguments between various factions for power within the Church itself. We have noted the elements of a gentle and moderate theology preached in a traditional setting and the pattern for a holy life, which should dissipate any fear of Death and the Day of Judgment.

In the meantime we shall leave the world of Trollope and enter a darker, more realistic environment where it was possible for the cries of the moral outcast to go unheeded by a Church which remained within constraints which it should have long outgrown. We are about to enter the world of Thomas Hardy.

⁸⁶ *Le Pasteur Anglican dans le Roman Victorien* p.43

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.58

⁸⁸ *The Victorian Age in Literature* p.133-4

⁸⁹ *Le Pasteur Anglican dans le Roman Victorien* p.43

Chapter 3: Thomas Hardy: The Death of the Outsider

In the case of Thomas Hardy the visitation of death is generally of a very different nature from the tradition favoured by Jeremy Taylor. Here we encounter no serene, well-prepared Christian greeting death with humble acceptance in the mould of a Septimus Harding. Death does not come in the role of a welcome friend in the novels that we are about to examine. It can be sudden, violent or self-imposed. It can catch its victim unawares or be the result of a distressing illness brought on, directly or indirectly, by mental or spiritual anguish. A dark shadow attends Hardy's deathbeds. Even when the elderly servant Grammer Oliver in *The Woodlanders* appears to be on her deathbed, there is a strange twist, for this old retainer has made a bargain to sell her body to the progressive, scientifically minded doctor, in order that her oversize brain may be the subject of his study of phrenology. The fears experienced by the old woman when she contemplates the fulfilment of this devil's pact deny her the dignity of tranquil Christian preparation for death. Once this fear is removed, she no longer lies in mortal sickness, makes a remarkable recovery and remains sturdy, hale and hearty like one of the venerable trees in the nearby forest.

The books that I intend to use in this study are all products of the eighties and nineties. Thus they belong to the late Victorian period. I have chosen to interpose a discussion of Hardy between Trollope and George Eliot for reasons of contrast of mood and theme rather than adhere strictly to chronological order. The four books proposed for discussion are: *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). In all of these novels we encounter death in some form or other, but in none is the Church overtly represented in the deathbed scene. We have left behind Trollope's world of clergymen of varying

degrees of competence and devotion. With Hardy the only truly religious scenes are those enacted by lay characters who experience the need for the Christian rites of passage but find themselves debarred from receiving them from the hands of the ordained clergy by reason of some moral problem that has placed them beyond the pale. We are no longer faced with Trollope's ethical situational problems capable of some sort of intellectual solution. Instead we have to do with human beings in the deepest possible trouble, because the society and church of the period has no accommodation to offer to those who have flouted convention or become dishonoured in the eyes of the world through no direct fault of their own. Hardy's characters, as we shall see, are not entirely helpless victims, but they encounter complications in their efforts to extricate themselves from intolerable situations. They are flawed human beings who sink ever deeper into the Slough of Despond but instead of emerging triumphant like Bunyan's pilgrims, some of them end up by dying in the wilderness, in D. H. Lawrence's terms "after having left the walled society . . . of the established convention."⁹⁰

With Hardy we are in the presence of genuine tragedy for which the seeds are sown in the early chapters of his books, like the spring that triggers the crisis in a classical play. The tragic characters carry within them the embryo of their own downfall, whether in the form of a personality flaw or some action that determines their ultimate destiny at the outset.

Lawrence suggests that Tess, Sue and others "were not at war with God" but "only with Society."⁹¹ It is also those whom Lawrence terms exceptional "aristocratic" human beings who are condemned to die rather than average men and women. He defines the former as characters like "Henchard, Alec, perhaps Jude, passionate

⁹⁰ *Study of Thomas Hardy* p. 21

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p.30

aristocratic males, who fell before the weight of the average . . . but who in more primitive times, would have formed romantic rather than tragic figures.”⁹²

Of course, some of the more bourgeois characters necessarily die too, but their death is of a different quality and does not rank as a truly tragic outcome. A striking example of the latter can be seen in the death of Giles Winterborne in *The Woodlanders*. Although he does not survive physically, he dies “during probation” and “has flowers on his grave.”⁹³ We shall discuss the attendant circumstances of Giles’s death in the context of *The Woodlanders*.

We mentioned earlier the suddenness of death which conflicts with the ideal preparation for the Christian death advocated by Jeremy Taylor. No guidebook could prepare families for the shock of one snatched away without warning in the tradition of the Matthean apocalypse:

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together, one will be taken and one will be left.⁹⁴

Henchard reflects upon the same theme when he finds himself ripe for death and indulges in spiritual self-flagellation.

Here and everywhere be folk dying before their time like frosted leaves, though wanted by their families, the country and the world; while I, an outcast, an encumbrance of the ground, wanted by nobody and despised by all, live on against my will.⁹⁵

The Mayor of Casterbridge

As *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is the first novel in our chronology, we shall examine the role of the outcast which Henchard has come to merit by virtue of the violence that he has committed against conventional morality. However, before we do

⁹² *Study of Thomas Hardy*. p.48

⁹³ *Ibid.* p.49

⁹⁴ Matthew 24: 40-41

⁹⁵ *The Mayor of Casterbridge* p.244

so, we shall discuss the nature and impact of the other deaths in the novel which occur prior to that of Henchard.

Henchard's attempts to make amends for his initial outrageous action occur sporadically throughout the novel. Good though his intentions may be, they seldom yield anything but a bitter harvest. When his wronged wife, whom he has remarried, fell gravely ill, "he sent for the richest, busiest doctor, whom he supposed to be the best."⁹⁶ This material generosity achieves nothing and Susan Henchard dies regardless.

It is Elizabeth-Jane whose experience of life is deepened by watching by her mother's deathbed. The authorial voice intervenes to inform the reader:

To learn to take the universe seriously there is no quicker way than to watch—to be a 'waker' as the country people call it.⁹⁷

Thus the death scene is described in human rather than spiritual terms. The last troubled conversation between mother and daughter involves the attempt of the former to shape the future of Elizabeth and Farfrae. The actual death came as a *fait accompli* to Farfrae, the first caller, who received the stark message "that Mrs. Henchard was dead —just dead—that very hour."⁹⁸ The first reactions to this death are described in material terms. Mrs. Henchard's meticulous arrangements for her laying-out are deemed "thoughtful" by the village women, those same who bring their practical skills to childbed and deathbed alike. The men of the village interpret respect for the dead in their own terms. It is wrong to sell skeletons, but there is no harm in digging up the coins used to close the eyes of the deceased. In Solomon Longways' words: "To respect the dead is sound doxology."⁹⁹ However there is an uneasy germ of truth in Mother

⁹⁶ *The Mayor of Casterbridge* p.89

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p.91

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p.91

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p.92

Cuxson's prediction about Susan Henchard that "her wishes and ways will all be as nothing."¹⁰⁰

The imminence of her death had prompted Mrs. Henchard to write a form of confession, not to a priest, but to her husband. "I am dying, and I might have held my tongue; but I could not."¹⁰¹ The fateful letter, which she had decreed should not be read until her daughter's wedding day, is discovered and opened at a singularly infelicitous moment and precipitates a crisis. Henchard's efforts on behalf of his supposed daughter now rebound bitterly upon him, "and the fruition of the whole scheme was such dust and ashes as this."¹⁰² Here is a symbolic death. The evocation of the words of Job and the psalmist are frequently present in the novel.

It is the aftermath of Susan Henchard's death that makes it significant. In the case of Lucetta, however, it is the crude re-enactment of a past scandal that intrudes with violence at a time when she had within her the promise of fertility and continuity. Henchard's attempt to intervene and help is frustrated, because he has forfeited his credibility in the eyes of Farfrae. The Old Testament judgement has fallen upon him once more and "he cursed himself like a less scrupulous Job."¹⁰³

With Lucetta we encounter another attempt at a deathbed confession. Again it is not from a priest that she seeks absolution but from Farfrae, her husband.

She had tried to lisp out to him the secret which so oppressed her. ¹⁰⁴

The reader is left with incomplete knowledge of how much of the truth was actually articulated. The seal of the confessional was in her husband's hands and "remained Farfrae's secret alone."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ *The Mayor of Casterbridge* p.92

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p.96

¹⁰² Ibid. p.98

¹⁰³ Ibid. p.219

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p.220

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.221

Henchard's walking up and down outside the house of death and his constant enquiries constitute something in the nature of a wake, but his concern was centred upon the future of his stepdaughter rather than upon any residue of sentimental attachment to Lucetta. Ironically he is the one to witness the removal of the damper from the doorknocker, "because they can knock as loud as they will; she will never hear it any more."¹⁰⁶ Lucetta, one notes, was borne to the churchyard for a Christian burial, although Hardy does not dwell on this.

Henchard's own death is prefigured on at least two occasions. Firstly he is driven to contemplate suicide when he fears that he will be totally bereft of human companionship.

There would remain nobody for him to be proud of, nobody to fortify him.¹⁰⁷

When he comes upon the effigy in the pond, it seems to him that he foresees his own death.

Not a man somewhat resembling him, but one in all respects his counterpart, his actual double, was floating in Ten Hatches Hole.¹⁰⁸

The realisation of his misapprehension comes only when Elizabeth explains about the effigy and he concludes:

That performance of theirs killed her, but kept me alive!

A second symbolic foreshadowing of Henchard's death can be seen in the perishing of the little caged bird that he had intended as a wedding present and a symbol of reconciliation for his stepdaughter. When Henchard, as a result of further misunderstanding, parts from Elizabeth with the words: "I'll never trouble 'ee again,

¹⁰⁶ *The Mayor of Casterbridge* p.221

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p.226

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 222

Elizabeth-Jane—no, not to my dying day,”¹⁰⁹ he unthinkingly abandons the hapless bird to its fate. He is not to know that Elizabeth will give the bird some form of symbolic burial when she learns the truth.

The death par excellence in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is that of Henchard himself. Here is no *Nunc Dimittis* situation. We are not even privy to a deathbed scene, as the outcast has drifted off into a hermit-like existence tended only at the very last by the faithful Whittle who has remained with him with the pertinacity and constancy of Ruth cleaving to Naomi. Whittle narrates in the last chapter:

And I followed en over Grey’s Bridge, and ee turned and zeed me, and said, “You go back! “ But I followed, and he turned again, and said, “Do you hear, sir? Go back!” But I zeed that he was low, and I followed on still. Then ‘a said, “Whittle, what do you follow me for when I’ve told you to go back all these times?” And I said, “Because, sir, I see things be bad with ‘ee, and you were kind-like to mother if you were rough to me, and I would fain like to be kind-like to you.” Then I walked on, and I followed; and he never complained at me no more.

When Elizabeth and Farfrae eventually locate the wanderer, it is too late for forgiveness and reconciliation this side of the grave.

The real dramatic coup comes with the discovery of Henchard’s will, surely one of the most chilling and comfortless documents in literature. The crumpled scrap of paper, uncomplicated by legal phraseology, bears a clear and stark message for posterity. If Henchard had had his own way completely, he would have vanished from the earth as though he had never been. The will contains an absolute negation of Christian burial customs. The negative injunctions leave no room for any kind of observance of the last rite of passage. The command to abstain from mourning has none of Saint Paul’s justification for this in the promise of eternal bliss. The whole will smacks of belief in eternal damnation and alienation from any Christian tradition. It is eloquent in the sense

¹⁰⁹ *The Mayor of Casterbridge* p.250

of absence and godlessness, which it evokes. It aims at a complete cutting off from the ties of this world and the denial of any promise beyond it.

The lack of consecrated burial places Henchard in the category of the pagan, the unbaptised or the criminal who has committed the unforgivable. For the man who loved music and was seduced into friendship with his rival by the latter's vocal talent, there is to be no tolling of the bell. Only silence, the silence of the grave. He is to be invisible as he lies within his coffin. No friend is permitted to have sight of his body or pay last respects. No one is to attend his funeral. He will be interred by the sexton without benefit of clergy. No flowers. Thus nothing will mark his grave or grow and blossom upon it, in contrast to Giles Winterborne's in *The Woodlanders*. Finally, no remembrance. He is to be blotted out of the book of life for all time at his own request. He stands as his own judge at the last. Not even the tragic classical Queen Dido in Purcell's opera, who wishes her wrongs and her fate to be forgotten, will deny herself the remembrance of those who remain behind. "Remember me, but ah, forget my fate."

So stark are the final commands in this last will and testament that it is almost impossible to remain human while fulfilling them. We are told:

What Henchard had written in the anguish of his dying was respected as far as practicable by Elizabeth-Jane, though less from a sense of the sacredness of last words, than from her independent knowledge that the man who wrote them meant what he said.¹¹⁰

She was to derive no "mournful pleasure" from her actions. We recall the subtitle, "A Story of Character." Although there is a thread of fatalism present in the novel, Henchard is undoubtedly a powerful character who is largely the architect of his own destruction. His iron will is still active from beyond the grave. The directions in the will were recognisable as "a part of the same stuff that his whole life was made of."¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *The Mayor of Casterbridge* p.255

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p.255

Despite the grim quality of Henchard's death, Raymond Williams reminds us that "Hardy does not celebrate isolation and separation. He mourns them, and yet always has the courage to look them steadily in the face."¹¹²

The legacy to Elizabeth-Jane is a deeper understanding of the vicissitudes of life. There is a problematic element in the last paragraph of the novel. On the one hand she realises that, although she may class herself among the fortunate, there are fellow mortals who deserve more from life than they receive. However the more significant realisation was that of "the persistence of the unforeseen." The haven of tranquillity which she has now attained is in stark contrast to her earlier conviction "that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain." The latter state is one with which we become familiar in our reading of Hardy.

The Woodlanders

Let us consider the implications of alienation from society in a less dark context where there is no anti-hero of the stature of Henchard, whom Lawrence terms "the dark villain." Williams suggests that the pressures to which Hardy's characters are subjected originate from within the system of living, not from the outside.¹¹³ We found before in interpreting the Victorian application of Jeremy Taylor's theology that in order to come to terms with death, one must first of all bring this present life to the fullest possible fruition in terms of works and self-knowledge. Hardy's characters are thwarted in their endeavours in this life. What appears to be for the best often embarks them on a course of disaster. In *The Woodlanders* the superior education accorded to Grace Melbury renders her unfit to wed Giles Winterborne to whom she had been promised. On the other hand she does not appear sufficiently genteel to aspire to a higher class of society.

¹¹² *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* p.117

¹¹³ *Ibid.* p.114

She is left in an ambivalent situation where she hovers between two worlds, and either way there will be a *mésalliance*.

The original title of this novel, *Fitzpiers at Hintock*,¹¹⁴ would have focused upon the doctor whom D. H. Lawrence describes as “maudlin, weak but not wicked” and “pitiable.”¹¹⁵ However Hardy opted for a title which involved all his personages, for their fates are inextricably linked as they wander in their disillusionment in the tragic counterpart of the Forest of Arden, the setting for the dramatic interplay of characters and the scene of two of the deaths. The forest itself provides the mood for the passions and misunderstandings to which the characters fall victim.

Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling.¹¹⁶

The potential threat of death is omnipresent as in the whole of Victorian society. *Media in vita in morte sumus*. Yet here in the forest there is organic development, and everything should have its due season.

Marty South's father, the first to die, is not a young man but neither do we receive the impression that he has reached his allotted span. His death is not a comfortable one, for the man has become obsessed with the idea that the great elm outside his window will fall. “He declares it will come down and cleave us, like ‘the sword of the Lord and of Gideon,’” reports his daughter.¹¹⁷ Giles' attempts to interfere with nature by lopping the tree have no beneficial effect. The tree seems to grow grotesquely taller in the sick man's eyes. When Giles, on Dr. Fitzpiers' advice, fells the tree altogether, he has administered the *coup de grâce* to the sick man whose irrational

¹¹⁴ Introduction p.xxvii, Ref. D. Kramer: *Revisions & Visions: T. Hardy's The Woodlanders*

¹¹⁵ *The Study of Thomas Hardy* p.47

¹¹⁶ *The Woodlanders* p.52

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.99

fears reach a climax: "Oh, it's gone!—where?—where?"¹¹⁸ This echoes the question of the ultimate destination of the whole of creation. The fair visions, which appear in other novels of the period, are all based on an extension of biblical apocalyptic language and advance one no further except as an exercise of the imagination.

The matter-of-fact reaction of Fitzpiers to his patient's death brings the reader down to earth in a secular environment. "D***d if my remedy hasn't killed him!"¹¹⁹ Fitzpiers remains consistent in his attitudes to significant events in life and to the rites of passage. He is prepared to thwart Grace's desire to be married in church.

I don't see the necessity of going there! —Marriage is a civil contract, and the shorter and simpler it is made the better. People don't go to church when they take a house or even when they make a will!¹²⁰

Ultimately he is forced by circumstance into agreement to a religious ceremony.

"To holy church we'll go," but he adds sardonically, "and much good may it do us."¹²¹

Fitzpiers is presented as an experimenter and scholar in the tradition of the more progressive nineteenth century doctors like Lydgate in *Middlemarch*. His professional expertise is something in which his wife can put her trust in time of crisis, such as the grave illness of Giles. The author comments favourably, "A real inquirer he was," although he hints that Fitzpiers' reading matter was not always 'matériel of science.'¹²²

Although Grammer Oliver did not succumb to her illness, she was previously in mortal terror of the consequences of the promise she had made to leave her body for medical experimentation. She pleads vehemently with Grace:

¹¹⁸ *The Woodlanders* p.102

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p.102

¹²⁰ Ibid. p.165

¹²¹ Ibid. p.171

¹²² Ibid. p.124

Ah, if I were a young lady...and could save a poor old woman's skellington from a heathen's chopper, to rest in a Christian's grave, I would do it, and be glad to.¹²³

She is the only person to speak openly of Christian burial, the normal expectation of the traditional contemporary churchgoer. Grace senses that from the old woman's point of view Fitzpiers now appears as "a remorseless Jehovah of the sciences."¹²⁴

In order for her superstitious fears to be relieved, she must be released from the bargain which now seems reminiscent of Faust's pact with Mephistopheles. Her body must be laid in earth, presumably in the traditional Christian hope of the Resurrection.

The reader foresees the death of Giles Winterborne as the author warns of serious illness which has taken its toll of him. Giles is perceived, in D. H. Lawrence's interpretation, as one of the "undistinguished, bourgeois or average characters."¹²⁵

This type of character, Lawrence contends, is normally left practically unscathed. However Giles does die prematurely. In a gallant attempt to preserve Grace's honour he submits himself to the rigours of sleeping outside in harsh weather. In his weakened state he is doomed to succumb. However Giles' death has positive elements. He does not die alone and untended, although he is unable to communicate with those around him. In the end his death is peaceful, like that of an old man.

In less than an hour the delirium ceased; then there was an interval of somnolent painlessness and soft breathing, at the end of which Winterborne passed quietly away.¹²⁶

This was entirely in character with the description in an early chapter.

He was one of those silent, unobtrusive beings who want little from others in the way of favour or condescension—

¹²³*The Woodlanders* p.123

¹²⁴*Ibid.* p.123

¹²⁵*The Study of Thomas Hardy* p.49

¹²⁶*The Woodlanders* p.320

When Grace and Marty keep watch over the body, they improvise a short religious service with reading from the Psalter and, after some scruples, prayer for the dead man's soul. This lay-conducted rite foreshadows the more explicit service of infant baptism which we encounter in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. As far as mourning is concerned, the two women observe the ceremony of taking flowers to the grave together until Grace returns to her husband. Marty is then left as sole mourner, stressing the continuity of Giles's work which she will carry on in this life.

Whenever I plant the young larches I'll think that none can plant as you planted; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider wring, I'll say none could do it like you. If I ever forget your name let me forget home and heaven.¹²⁷

The final vow echoes the exile's plaint in Psalm 137.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.

Remembrance which Henchard, the exceptional 'aristocrat' (D. H. Lawrence's term), had shunned, is the portion of Giles Winterborne, the 'average' character of whom something survives, at least in this world. And it is not only humanity that mourns Giles. His death has its effect upon his natural surroundings which mark his absence in a sense of deprivation and lament.

The whole wood seemed to be a house of death, pervaded by loss to its utmost length and breadth. Winterborne was gone, and the copses seemed to show the want of him.¹²⁸

Tess of the D' Urbervilles

**I would that folk forgot me quite
Forgot me quite!
I would that I could shrink from sight,
And no more see the sun.
Would it were time to say farewell,
To claim my nook, to need my knell.
Time for them all to stand and tell
Of my day's work as done.**

(Tess's Lament)

¹²⁷ *The Woodlanders* p.367

¹²⁸ Ibid. Ch. XLII p.326

Tess of the d'Urbervilles, "a pure woman", as the subtitle runs, is accorded her status in the headings of the narrative. In Phase the First she is the Maiden. In Phase the Second Maiden No More. It is the change which makes of her when she emerges from her period of confinement: "a stranger and an alien here, though it was no strange land that she was in."¹²⁹ She had suffered deep distress before the birth of her child.

"Her depression was then terrible, and she could have hidden herself in a tomb."¹³⁰

Her attempt to find solace within the church had failed miserably in the enclosed village society, for "she knew what their whispers were about, grew sick at heart, and felt she could come to church no more."¹³¹ This is her first experience of rejection by fellow Christians, a theme which is treated in other nineteenth century novels such as Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth*. During the period prior to the birth she achieves a degree of harmony with nature as she shuns her fellow human beings. However "the ephemeral nature" of the refuge of the small woodland animals parallels her own situation, and she must make some effort to reintegrate into society and try to earn her keep. Her working companions are to some extent aware of the ambivalence of Tess's feelings towards her child. One of them comments:

She's fond of that there child, though she mid pretend to hate en, and she say she wishes the baby and her too were in the churchyard.¹³²

Tess herself has a changed image in village society. Although the women in the field are friendly, they sing a ballad about a ruined maid. Her plight is seen as "a social warning" and her child's arrival constitutes "the baby's offence against society."¹³³

¹²⁹ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* p.69

¹³⁰ Ibid. p.65

¹³¹ Ibid. p.66

¹³² Ibid. p.70

¹³³ Ibid. p.72

Tess's attempt to have the child baptised, the prerequisite for inclusion in the Christian community, is frustrated by her father's proud refusal to summon the parson. She is thus faced with the need for emergency baptism, as the baby is about to die. Her prayer is one which, in all consistency to Jesus' welcome for little children, should have touched the heart of any professing to be a Christian.

O merciful God, have pity, have pity upon my poor baby! Heap as much of your anger as you want upon me, and welcome; but pity my child!

The improvised baptism, which she contrives, is a stroke of genius. Water and prayer book are to hand, and her young brothers and sisters, hastily awakened, provide an innocent congregation. Tess herself takes the role of the priest and baptises her child, naming him 'Sorrow.' The biblical parallel emphasises the poignancy of the situation, for the child named Benoni by the dying Rachel was renamed Benjamin (the son of the right hand) by his loving father.¹³⁴ That child lived, whereas Tess's child died. The passing of "Sorrow the Undesired" leaves Tess with a pressing problem. Was the christening doctrinally sufficient to guarantee a Christian burial for the child? At first the parson seems to give favourable consideration to her question. "My dear girl. It will be just the same."¹³⁵ However when it comes to the strict ecclesiastical legality of administering Christian burial, there was no straight answer and Tess finds herself rebuffed and she reacts violently:

"Then I don't like you. And I'll never come to your church no more."¹³⁶

The vicar's behaviour is by no means brutal and unthinking, but he projects a negative and legalistic image of the church. In the first instance when he had seemed to yield, we are told:

¹³⁴ Genesis 35: 18

¹³⁵ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. p.75

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p.76

The man and the ecclesiastic fought within him, and the victory fell to the man.¹³⁷

Later when he is troubled by scruples over technicalities, he is pressed by Tess to examine his own conscience and give her an honest answer as one human being to another. He finds himself conceding lamely that the absence of clergy to administer the rite should make no difference to the child. The author comments wryly:

How the vicar reconciled his answer with the strict notions he supposed himself to hold on those subjects it is beyond a layman's power to tell, though not to excuse.¹³⁸

Once more Tess is obliged to improvise and add her own religious symbols to the shabby unhallowed grave. The established church has been weighed in the balance and found sadly wanting in sympathetic understanding of the needs of humanity. It is the faith of children that stands out in stark relief against the unbending rigour of the church. In the baptism scene Tess's siblings had played their part "full of suspended wonder",¹³⁹ repeating the Lord's Prayer and being deeply impressed by their sister's authoritative bearing. Later in the novel in their last night in the cottage, the children sing the hymn entitled "Joyful" which contains the words:

**Here we suffer grief and pain,
Here we meet to part again.
In Heaven we part no more.**

The children sing the words, to which they are conditioned, automatically "with the phlegmatic passivity of persons who had long ago settled the question."¹⁴⁰

Tess cannot echo their childlike belief but feels constrained as on the occasion of her child's death to act independently and "be their Providence."¹⁴¹ Lay intervention is needed to prevent further suffering among the innocent.

¹³⁷ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* p.75

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* p.76

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* p.74

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.282

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 282

The link with Jeremy Taylor's eschatology is not broken in the vicissitudes of Tess's existence. She is constantly preoccupied with the thought of death, her own death, although she is ignorant of the day and the hour like Paul's Thessalonians. However she carries in her mind "Jeremy Taylor's thought that some time in the future those who had known her would say 'It is the —th, the day that poor Tess Durbeyfield died'; and there would be nothing singular to their minds in the statement." ¹⁴²

The poem, which we quoted at the beginning of the section, concludes on a deeply pessimistic note.

**I cannot bear my fate as writ,
I'd have my life unbe;
Would turn my memory to a blot
Make every relic of me rot
My doings be as they were not,
And gone all trace of me!**

We are reminded here that Tess, as a murderess, will be buried in unhallowed ground like her child Sorrow, "where all unbaptised infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid." ¹⁴³

Towards the end of the novel in the brief respite before her arrest, Tess earnestly asks Angel in the setting of the heathen temple, where they are taking refuge, "Tell me now, Angel, do you think we shall meet again after we are dead?"

Angel tries to avoid the issue by silence.

Like a greater than himself, to the critical question at the critical time he did not answer. ¹⁴⁴

However Angel's silence is not the sacrificial silence of the mute Christ before his accusers. It is a refusal to commit himself to a belief in eternity and the communion of saints, but he equally hears Tess's intercession that her sister may replace her in this life.

¹⁴² *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p.77

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p.76

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.312

And if she were to become yours it would almost seem as if death had not divided us.¹⁴⁵

On the very last page of the novel Angel Clare and Liza-Lu are together as witnesses to the sign that Tess has departed from this world.

The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless.

A note of hope is sounded in the last sentence when they emerge from their trance-like state and set forth together, like Adam and Eve at the end of *Paradise Lost*, when they faced the world after expulsion from Eden but knew that there was work and a new life ahead of them.

As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again and went on.

There is a heritage and some sense of continuity when Tess dies. She had agonised over the death and suffering of others but she had, like Jesus Christ entrusting his mother to Saint John, committed the living body of her sister to her husband's care in an almost biblical tradition of perpetuity.

Jude the Obscure

D. H. Lawrence speaks of death in the wilderness "after having left the walled security, and the comparative imprisonment, of the established convention".¹⁴⁶ This is a theme that we have already encountered. Lawrence suggests that the real tragedy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and in *Jude the Obscure* is that the protagonists are "unfaithful to the great unwritten morality, which would have bidden... Tess take and claim her Angel since she had the greater light;" and "would have bidden Jude and Sue endure for very honour's sake, since one must bide by the best one has known and not succumb to the lesser good."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. p.311

¹⁴⁶ *The Study of Thomas Hardy* p.21

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.30

Circumstances militate against Jude as they did against Grace in *The Woodlanders*. Grace is the victim of too much education of the wrong sort. Jude, with his frustrated academic ambitions, is trapped by his marriage to Arabella in a way of life which becomes repugnant to him. However the strong physical element, the vigorous sexuality that was part of his make-up, contains the seed of destruction in his relationship with Sue Bridehead, his intellectual soulmate. Lawrence contends that “Jude and Sue are damned, partly by their very being, but chiefly by their incapacity to accept the conditions of their own and each other’s being.”¹⁴⁸ Sue has the characteristics of a Vestal Virgin or of a Mary of Bethany who sat at Jesus’ feet and demanded only her spiritual portion. Her children, the physical products of an unequal union, are doomed to perish. Lawrence declares: “And her children, the proof thereof [of her womanhood], vanished like hoar-frost from her.”¹⁴⁹ The death of the children, apparently so shockingly and yet logically and expeditiously achieved, constitutes one of the most chilling discoveries in literature. Inured though we are nowadays to pathological details and graphic reconstructions of crime scenes, we echo the horror of Sue and the bewilderment of Jude in contemplating the scene. The final details provide the only explanation needed.

An overturned chair was near the elder boy, and his glazed eyes were slanted into the room; but those of the girl and the baby boy were closed.¹⁵⁰

The reason for the deaths is likewise so tragically simple, given the precocious logic of little Father Time, whose scribbled note read

Done because we are too menny.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ *Jude the Obscure*. p.117

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p.119

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p.263

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p.264

The organ practice nearby of the psalm “Truly God is loving unto Israel” provides a cruelly ironic accompaniment to the scene of desolation. The premature stillbirth of the last child of the union of Jude and Sue completes the catalogue of woe for the moment. It is only natural that Sue should hope for her own death. There is no room for spiritual comfort in the cemetery scene, no mention of clergy but only of a gravedigger resisting Sue’s attempt to disinter the corpses for a last physical contact. Sue is seen by Lawrence as one of Hardy’s aristocrats, a damned character. Even if she does not perish physically, her essential life is destroyed from this moment. She might as well be dead, as Arabella comments in a final epilogue for Sue.

She’s never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again till she’s as he is now.¹⁵²

Jude, on the other hand, is destined to sicken and undergo physical death. His intellectual aspirations, thwarted at the outset by his relationship with the coarse-grained Arabella, no longer have any meaning for him. Theology, especially, is deeply unsatisfying. He reflects:

The theologians, the apologists, and their kin the metaphysicians, the high-handed statesmen, and others, no longer interest me. All that has been spoilt for me by the grind of stern reality!¹⁵³

By this time the mark of death is upon him and Hardy speaks of his “corpse-like face.”

The final scene is played out in solitude, for Arabella has light-heartedly abandoned her nursing duties and Jude dies alone craving “a little water” which no one can give him, the ultimate symbol of the failure to supply the needs of his spirit. The contrast of the intrusion of the cheerful shouts from the river into the sombre scene of death is deeply impressive. The suffering theology of the early chapters of Job provides a grim litany. There is no New Testament comfort here, no Christian hope of Salvation

¹⁵² *Jude the Obscure*. p.322

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p.309

in the Resurrection. It is the darkest theology of the Old Testament, of Job and the psalmists.

Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?...For now should I have lain still and been quiet. I should have slept: then had I been at rest! (Job 3: 11 & 13 KJV)

D. H. Lawrence meditated early in his *Study of Thomas Hardy* upon the ephemeral poppy, a symbol of the vanity of human life. We return now to these words as they seem a fitting epitaph for Jude who is last seen lying dead beside his few dog-eared classical books, the remnants of his aborted studies.

Vanity, and vanity, and pathetic transience of mortality. All that is left us to call eternal is the tick-tack of birth and death, monotonous as time---¹⁵⁴

Yet despite Hardy's grim accounts of the destinies of his characters, who receive no spiritual support from the representatives of the church as an institution, the language and imagery of the King James Bible are omnipresent and cannot be ignored. Some of the images are sustained and carried through a whole novel as, for example, the comparison between the Saul and David relationship and that of Henchard and Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Julian Moynahan exploits this parallelism very fully in a study entitled *The Mayor of Casterbridge and The Old Testament's First Book of Samuel*. There are explicit references in the body of the text and other less obvious lines of comparison which can be traced or hinted at. The Old Testament morality is much more in keeping with the harsh judgements meted out in Hardy's novels, but he also makes use of New Testament allusions to reinforce his message. The Crucifixion is present implicitly as a metaphor in the last chapter of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and the two figures of Angel and Liza-Lu are likened to Giotto's *Two Apostles* or the Two Haloed Mourners of the fresco.

¹⁵⁴ *The Study of Thomas Hardy* p.10

The imagery of John Bunyan is also evoked on many occasions, but it fulfils a special function, largely artistic and as part of the cultural heritage, as does frequently the use of biblical metaphor or simile in the novels. Some of the latter even seems to acquire a coded meaning which one recognises on its reappearance in a second novel. For example the veil of the temple rent in twain occurs in both *Jude the Obscure* and in *The Woodlanders*. The reader is immediately aroused and made aware of a dramatic and familiar symbol which serves to enrich and enhance the literary moment.

We shall return to a further discussion of the use of biblical language and imagery after the study of the work of another great nineteenth century writer, George Eliot, who sets a very different slant on the perception of theology and its impact upon the society of her age. We shall also encounter a more charitable presentation of the figure of the clergyman who has a more positive contribution to offer.

Chapter 4: George Eliot

***The Parson who serves others—Humanist survival with Christian overtones—
“The number who live faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs”
(Final paragraph of last chapter of *Middlemarch*)***

**In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour?
(Book of Common Prayer 1662, Burial Service)**

**---a Christ who is only a distinguished man, creates indeed no difficulty to the understanding, but is not the Christ in whom the Church believes.
(*Das Leben Jesu* by David Friedrich Strauss translated by George Eliot §147)**

---the theologian may find himself driven either directly to state his opinions, and attempt to elevate the people to his ideas: or, since this attempt must necessarily fail, carefully to adapt himself to the conception of the community; or, lastly, since, even on this plan, he may betray himself, in the end to leave the ministerial profession. (Ibid. §152)

In the case of George Eliot we find ourselves confronted by an extremely complex understanding of theology and its impact upon the life of nineteenth century English society. Mary Ann Evans was well acquainted with different branches of the Christian Church and the doctrines which they professed. At one end of the religious spectrum she had personal experience of having belonged to an Evangelical community in her youth. At the other she was the translator of David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* which she had digested thoroughly in the process. In a letter to Charles Ritter she reflects upon the early period when she approached this task.

I was then a girl, intensely interested in Biblical Criticism, and just awakened to the labours of the Germans in that long path.¹⁵⁵

She was also familiar with the writings of Auguste Comte¹⁵⁶, and throughout her adult life she moved constantly in intellectual circles where the latest philosophical ideas were aired and debated. Besides this, she was no mean critic of contemporary writing and honed her literary skills in this useful apprenticeship. All this allied to a finely tuned awareness of the advances in the world of science and technology made her an

¹⁵⁵ Letter to Charles Ritter written from Redhill 3 July 1872

¹⁵⁶ e.g. *System of Positive Polity* (1851-54) He maintains that the empirical sciences are the only source of knowledge but he proposes his religion of humanity which aims to promote socially beneficial behaviour.

enlightened commentator on the spirit of the age. Brian Spittles identifies the different strands that combined to make up Eliot's theological understanding.

She fused diverse forces---French Enlightenment, German Metaphysics, Romanticism, Positivism, and a good deal of actual scientific understanding----to forge her belief in the unity and value of human experience.¹⁵⁷

However it is the depiction of humanity itself rather than mere toying with theoretical ideas that fascinates Eliot. Her characters, rather than her plots, remain in one's mind long after the tale is told, for she engages the sympathy of the reader both by penetrating the innermost thoughts of her characters and by intervening as their author on their behalf. If Eliot has succeeded in her strategy, one cannot remain neutral or unmoved by the plight of the individual who struggles against the odds in an unsympathetic environment. It is *La Comédie Humaine* in its fullest sense, a rich amalgam of personages from different classes of society rubbing shoulders with each other and trying to come to terms with the changing face of nineteenth century England.

George Eliot employs the device of looking back with apparent nostalgia to a period some 25-30 years earlier, for example in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. This allows for a sense of perspective and contrast with the contemporary situation. She can also make highly critical comments without obvious offence to those in her immediate vicinity.

Mine, I fear, is not a well-regulated mind; it has an occasional tenderness for old abuses; it lingers with a certain fondness over the days of nasal clerks and top-booted parsons and has a sigh for the departed shades of vulgar errors.¹⁵⁸

As in the case of Trollope, from her earliest writing, Eliot demonstrates a fascination with clergymen as prominent characters in her novels. Her concern, however, is not with the workings of the hierarchy or the structure of the institution and

¹⁵⁷ *George Eliot, Godless Woman* p.87

¹⁵⁸ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.1

its politics but rather with the clergymen as ordinary people who may be treated like the rest of the characters. In a letter she confides:

—I mentioned to G. [George Lewes] that I had thought of the plan of writing a series of stories containing sketches drawn from my own observation of the clergy, and calling them *Scenes of Clerical Life*.¹⁵⁹

She underlines in another letter that these sketches will reflect what she herself has seen and noted in her own experience.

My sketches both of churchmen and dissenters, with whom I am almost equally acquainted, are drawn from close observation of them in real life, and not from the hearsay or from the descriptions of novelists.¹⁶⁰

Her real life observation of historical examples had already emerged in essays, e.g. *Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming* where she had been highly critical in her assessment, as his theology represented the antithesis of what she sought to nurture.

“He insists on good works as the sign of justifying faith, as labours to be achieved to the glory of God, but he rarely presents them as the spontaneous outflow of a soul filled with divine love.”¹⁶¹

In the case of the fictional clergymen she will present us with rounded characters with their fair share of positive and negative qualities as well as memorable idiosyncrasies which will recall the creations of Trollope, with whom she was acquainted.

The opening quotation to this section came from the Burial Service.

In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour?

It is essentially the kind of clergyman who is capable of supplying this succour that George Eliot will favour. We are reminded of Hardy’s deeply troubled characters such as Tess vainly seeking practical help from the church. The abyss of despair and grief into which Eliot’s characters fall is seldom of the same hopeless nature as that of

¹⁵⁹ *Letters*, II, 410. Ed. G. S. Haight, New Haven, 1954-55

¹⁶⁰ *Letters*, II, 347

¹⁶¹ *Essays: Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming* p.150, published in *Westminster Review* 1855

Hardy's protagonists, but they can be profoundly in need of good counsel and support from a spiritual mentor. It is interesting with Eliot how it is only a theology based on sympathetic human understanding that suffices to satisfy spiritual and emotional needs.

Let us consider the first of the sketches, *The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton*. Here the role of the clergyman is seen in paradoxical terms, since he himself is incapable of providing the comfort and teaching which his congregation requires. In time, however, he becomes the recipient of that which he himself could not supply in terms of human sympathy. The paradox is carried into Barton's clerical practice.

He preached Low-Church doctrines—as evangelical as anything to be heard in the Independent Chapel; and he made High-Church assertion of ecclesiastical power and functions.¹⁶²

He manages to antagonise his congregation and choir by his choice of music and by his prohibition of the singing of the wedding hymn to greet a newly wed couple. His preaching arguments are lacking in logical sequence. This does not pass unnoticed by his hearers, one of whom comments aptly:

He can preach as good a sermon as need be heard when he writes it down. But when he tries to preach wi'out book, he rambles about, and doesn't stick to his text, and every now and then he flounders about like a sheep as has cast itself and can't get on its legs again.¹⁶³

It is not that Eliot necessarily sets great store on good preaching as the criterion for a good clergyman. She excuses Mr. Gilfil his stock of frequently repeated sermons on the grounds that he is a much loved pastor who cares for and understands his community. This he demonstrates in little acts of kindness, as we shall see later.

¹⁶² *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.53

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p.48

Amos Barton, on the other hand, has little understanding of human nature. In his pastoral ministry he cannot relate to his parishioners, speak to them in an idiom that they can understand or convey an effective Christian message. Mrs. Patten laments:

When Mr. Barton comes to see me, he talks about nothing but my sins and my need o' mercy.¹⁶⁴

It is in the workhouse that his inadequacy for his pastoral task is demonstrated most forcibly. He tries to convey in his preaching the flavour of the biblical scholarship which he fancies to be incumbent upon him to pass on. The very substance of his sermon was scarcely calculated to engage the interest of a disparate group of needy souls, for

he talked of Israel and its sins, of chosen vessels, of the Paschal lamb, of blood as a medium of reconciliation, and he strove in this way to convey religious truth within reach of the Fodge and Fitchett mind.¹⁶⁵

In all this he demonstrated “a natural incapacity for teaching”¹⁶⁶ and for gauging capabilities and reactions, which had not been advanced by his Cambridge education. However it is the manner in which Barton puts his supposedly Christian principles into action in the workhouse that is the most shocking and dismal aspect of his ministry. He employs ‘carrot and stick’ theology to improve young Master Fodge for whom the promised reward does not appear sufficiently attractive to encourage good behaviour.

If you will be a good boy, God will love you, and you will grow up to be a good man.¹⁶⁷

But the boy has already been given an impression of a harsh, judgemental Old Testament God who “can burn him for ever.” Consequently it is quite beyond him to reconcile the notions of love and perpetual damnation.

¹⁶⁴ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.48

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.63

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p.63

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p.65

Master Fodge had no distinct vision of the benefit that would accrue to him for this change of courses.¹⁶⁸

Old Mrs. Brick's "visionary hope that the parson might be intending to replenish her snuff box" is rebuffed with the seemingly heartless comment,

Ah well! You'll soon be going where there is no more snuff. You'll be in need of mercy then.¹⁶⁹

Barton's intolerance of human weakness extends into his home where he dismisses his own children from the room because they are disturbing him.

Milly, some of these children must go away. I want to be quiet.¹⁷⁰

Given all those uncongenial features, it is hard to summon up a degree of sympathy for the principal character. However there are mitigating circumstances. Like Trollope's Rev. Josiah Crawley, Amos Barton, his wife and six children are obliged to exist on a very meagre stipend. There are necessarily debts to tradesmen, and it is a great struggle to keep up appearances in a society that demands that a clergyman be immaculately turned out to take his place in the world as a gentleman. The burden inevitably falls on Milly Barton, the Angel of the House, whose domestic skills are taxed to the limit to keep the household functioning. It is her personality that attracts any sympathetic intervention on the part of the community during her lifetime. Mr. Hackit comments:

--his wife's as nice a lady-like woman as I'd wish to see.¹⁷¹

Consequently little presents arrive from good-hearted parishioners who take pity on the family's needs. By the time Mr. Barton has had to seek extra sustenance from a clerical

¹⁶⁸ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.65

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p.64

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p.66

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p.49

charity, the congregation also recognised that their clergyman needed their material aid more than they needed his spiritual help.

Having sketched in all the flaws, both physical and spiritual, George Eliot changes tack and forewarns the reader.

I have all my life had a sympathy for mongrel ungainly dogs, who are nobody's pets.¹⁷²

In the fifth chapter she becomes explicit when she intervenes on behalf of Mr. Barton, employing a device that Oliver Lovesey terms “narratorial intrusion”, the function of which is to “question and redirect faulty reader perception”.¹⁷³

Depend upon it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks in a voice of quite ordinary tones. In that case, I should have no fear of your not caring to know what farther befell the Rev. Amos Barton, or of your thinking the homely details I have to tell at all beneath your attention.¹⁷⁴

This is no caricature. Despite his mediocrity Amos Barton imagines himself to be caught up in the “vibration of an intellectual movement”¹⁷⁵ in the church. (We recall that the author claims to be referring to the 1830s. Elisabeth Jay suggests that Eliot’s “excessive reliance upon her experience as a comparatively isolated Evangelical” was responsible for historical inaccuracy about the date of the impact of the Tractarian movement in the provinces).¹⁷⁶ Amos is striving against unequal odds to put his misguided ideas into practice. He has become interested in Episcopacy, and his reading has had a noticeable effect upon him. However his attempts at scholarship and his perception of the Episcopal establishment are hampered by his lack of vision and by the context in which he is attempting to convey his theological message.

¹⁷² *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.55

¹⁷³ *The Clerical Character in George Eliot's Fiction* p.24

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p.81

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p.67

¹⁷⁶ *The Religion of the Heart* p.227

Barton is not the only clergyman to evoke criticism in this story, There are thumbnail sketches of others. These come in the form of succinct caricatures of an almost Trollopian stamp, for these other figures are peripheral and are not undergoing the character analysis accorded to Amos Barton as a typical specimen of humanity. In Mr. Ely we have an example of outward show, reminiscent of our first meeting with the Rev. Caleb Oriel in *Framley Parsonage*.

Mr. Ely “looks particularly graceful at the head of his table, and, indeed, on all occasions where he acts as president and moderator.”¹⁷⁷ Mr. Fellowes “who has the highest character everywhere except in his own parish”¹⁷⁸ appears as a quarrelsome character in the local situation but has “bought golden opinions” elsewhere. Mr. Furness, the occasional poet, transfers the faults of his verse to his sermons where “there was an exuberance of metaphor and simile entirely original, and not in the least borrowed from any resemblance in the things compared.”¹⁷⁹ One senses that George Eliot must have listened with humour and with critical ear to many idiosyncratic pulpit performances, from which she skilfully extracted the essence.

In Barton’s case, however, we are concerned with the human problem represented. It happens that he is also a clergyman who is supposed to have the strength to uphold his weaker brothers and sisters. His moral reputation suffers due to the selfish Countess Czerlaski, whose presence in the home also stretches the parsonage budget to breaking point. It is left to the lowliest member of the household to confront the countess and precipitate her departure with a few home truths. By this time Milly’s health has suffered greatly, and in the end she is not strong enough to survive the birth of her last child, a social reflection of the destiny of exhausted wives who eventually

¹⁷⁷ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.92

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. p.92

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p.93

died in childbirth and left behind numerous motherless children. Milly's death is particularly sensitively sketched. Barton tries to prepare his children for the inevitable. His stark message is blurted out in short, staccato sentences.

My children—God is going to take away your dear mamma from us. She wants to see you to say good-bye. You must try to be very good and not cry.¹⁸⁰

The last injunction evokes the stiff upper lip attitude that Englishmen traditionally endeavoured to maintain in the face of any calamity. Perhaps we should not blame Amos Barton too harshly here, since even Saint Augustine, who wished to give expression to his grief for his mother Monica, confessed afterwards: "I repressed it with a man's voice, the voice of my heart was silent."¹⁸¹

Milly, thoughtful to the last, is concerned with her husband's welfare and comfort and commends him to their little daughter Patty.

Patty, I'm going away from you. Love your papa. Comfort him; and take care of your little brothers and sisters. God will help you.¹⁸²

It is in Patty that Milly achieves some degree of immortality. Her young life is devoted to caring for her father and younger siblings. We are told at the end of the story:

Milly did not take all her love from the earth when she died. She left some of it in Patty's heart.¹⁸³

This is the legacy of kindness which remains behind when Eliot's more pious and loving characters leave this world. We shall meet something similar, but developed at greater length, at the end of *Middlemarch*.

¹⁸⁰ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.107

¹⁸¹ *Confessions*: IX.12. 29: Geoffrey Rowell's translation in *The Liturgy of Christian Burial* p. 24

¹⁸² *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.108

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* p.115

Milly seems to be aware of a spiritual experience as she dies. She hears music and has already passed beyond her husband's reach when she asks: "Music, music—didn't you hear it?" Barton, the theologian, cannot cope. Barton, the man, is desolate. "She isn't dead?" he cries incredulously.

In his inconsolable state he acknowledges the missing ingredient in his treatment of his wife as he weeps by her grave.

Milly, Milly, dost thou hear me? I didn't love thee enough—I wasn't tender enough to thee—but I think of it all now.¹⁸⁴

The *Wendepunkt* in this story comes with the change in the attitude of the parishioners when they learn of Milly's death. They come to view Mr. Barton in a new light. "He was consecrated anew by his great sorrow."¹⁸⁵ His human suffering in bereavement has served to endear him to his congregation who had loved and respected his wife. Thus sympathy is gained vicariously.

Milly's memory hallowed her husband, as of old the place was hallowed on which an angel from God had alighted.¹⁸⁶

The biblical language provides a solemn note and places Barton in a position which he could never have achieved on his own merits. When he has to leave Milby, there is regret at his going but not because of the value of his ministry.

--not that any of them thought his spiritual gifts pre-eminent, or was conscious of great edification from his ministry.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ *Scenes of Clerical Life* pp.114-5

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.110

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.112

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.113

The clergyman who arouses the author's sympathetic portrayal is Mr. Cleves who epitomises practical Christianity. Although he is the one who officiates sensitively at Milly's funeral, he is described earlier as "a clergyman who is not associated with the undertaker, but thought of as the surest helper under a difficulty."¹⁸⁸ Eliot implies that he has the right ideas about good preaching, which he tailors to his listeners. His sermons are such as the wheelwright and the blacksmith can understand, because "he can call a spade a spade, and knows how to disencumber ideas of their wordy frippery."¹⁸⁹ Like Robert Elsmere, he also gives conversational lectures on useful practical matters to working men. For this he acquires the reputation of being "uncommon knowin'". In order to redress the balance of the practical theologian as opposed to the biblical scholar or systematic theologian, Eliot informs us that Mr. Cleves also had the advantage of good scholarship. He was "perhaps the best Grecian of the party."¹⁹⁰ This is consistent with the author's placing of the story in the 1830s, a period when a good education was still based on classical studies and the humanities.

Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story

We shall move on briefly to the clergyman in the second 'Scene.' We meet him first of all in his venerable old age, retrace the adventures of his youth, which left their indelible mark on him, and finally review his impact in the light of the middle section. It is made obvious to the reader from the first page that Mr. Gilfil is much loved and respected. At his death there is observance of the deepest possible mourning by the community. The congregation looks askance at anyone who fails to conform. There is no need for the author to intervene and crave the reader's indulgence and sympathy. It is

¹⁸⁸ *Scenes of Clerical Life*. p.93

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p.93

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p.94

taken for granted. We are told that Mr. Gilfil spoke the people's language to them in everyday intercourse. He used dialect words but did not forfeit their respect. The warmth of his personality seemed to colour everything he did. It was not only the little practical acts of kindness to young and old in the parish that had their effect, but the beneficent aura which his personality cast on any sacrament or rite.

The benefits of baptism were supposed to be somehow bound up with Mr. Gilfil's personality, so metaphysical a distinction as that of a man and his office being, as yet, quite foreign to the mind of a good Shepperton churchman--¹⁹¹

Mr. Gilfil has, however, no claim to intellectual excellence, for his sermons "made no unreasonable demand on the Shepperton intellect."¹⁹² We are told that he performed his spiritual functions "with undeviating attention to brevity and dispatch."¹⁹³ He also belongs to the tradition of hunting clergymen who wore top-boots and sometimes omitted to remove his spurs before ascending to the pulpit. This is in keeping with the image of the gentleman clergymen whom we encountered in Trollope.

We are let into the locked room where Maynard Gilfil treasures sentimental mementoes, the remnants of his love-affair, that great event that changed his life and left him with "wounds healed over with some rough boss." Eliot sustains the image of the venerable tree in her description,

The heart of him was sound, the grain was of the finest.¹⁹⁴

After his passionate love-affair he has attained "the unexpected quiescence of old age",¹⁹⁵ the last part of life's journey.

One gains the impression that he has never been more than an adequate preacher. After a sermon delivered at Cheverel when he was a young chaplain, the

¹⁹¹ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.125

¹⁹² *Ibid.* p.126

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* p.121

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p.244

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p.243

author describes the mood of the company as “that brisk and cheerful air which a sermon is often observed to produce when it is quite finished.”¹⁹⁶

It is as the comforter to one in mortal distress that Maynard Gilfil eventually shows his strength and comes into his own. It requires compassion and sensitivity to penetrate and address the deeply troubled spirit of Caterina who thinks that she has carried out her fatal intent upon her faithless lover.

God sees us as we are altogether, not in separate feelings or action, as our fellow-men see us...God sees that you could not have committed that crime.¹⁹⁷

There is the very natural rhythm of a broken confession, interspersed with words of comfort. Eliot will develop this technique later in *Adam Bede* where the Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris, manages to penetrate the barrier of rejection to comfort Hetty Sorrel in her prison cell. Eliot indicates clearly that it is the religion of sympathy that serves to calm the troubled soul and bring final acceptance and peace.

The brief interlude of happiness with a delicate Tina is Gilfil's only transient reward. Thereafter his passion dies in him for “Gilfil's love went with her [Caterina] into deep silence for evermore.”¹⁹⁸

Tina craved remembrance from those whom she had trusted as friends. To the faithful servant Bates she says significantly on her wedding day: “Always remember Tina”,¹⁹⁹ for she seems to sense that she will not linger long in this world. For Gilfil there is a legacy of suffering stoically borne. There is a premonition of this when he informs Sir Christopher of Tina's disappearance.

We can hardly learn humility and tenderness enough except by suffering...and God sees we are in need of suffering, for it is falling more and more heavily on us.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.196

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p.235

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p.243

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p.242

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p.224

The same humility and tenderness remained with him in the latter days of his ministry. It was seen in the practical acts of kindness in the fashion of the Good Samaritan and, to a lesser degree, in the expression of his theology, **little more than an expansion of the concise thesis, that those who do wrong will find it worse for them, and those who do well will find it better for them.**²⁰¹

George Eliot sets great store by practical piety and the expression of sympathy. The clergymen who win her approval are those who exemplify the highest human qualities and employ them altruistically. They are, of necessity, flawed human beings, but this only serves to make them all the more congenial and in harmony with the society to which they belong.

Janet's Repentance

--A Christ who is only a distinguished man, creates indeed no difficulty to the understanding, but is not the Christ in whom the Church believes---

Thus wrote Strauss in George Eliot's translation. As a translator she became thoroughly familiar with his mode of thinking, upon which she reflected in her maturity as she developed her own understanding of a religion of the heart. She has expressed her spirituality in many of her letters as well as in her novels. In 1863 she wrote as follows:

It seems to me the soul of Christianity lies not at all in the facts of an individual life, but in the ideas of which that life was the meeting-point and the new starting-point.²⁰²

We ended our analysis of *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story* on a note of suffering. In *Janet's Repentance* we encounter a more explicit account of Christlike sacrifice and ascetic

²⁰¹ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.126

²⁰² Letter to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor, 30 July 1863, *The George Eliot. Letters*, Vol. 4, p.95

service to the community in the person of the Rev. Edgar Tryan, for despite the title, for most of the story the major emphasis is upon Tryan. U. C. Knoepfelmacher describes him as having “the stature required for an Aristotelian tragic hero”.²⁰³

We encounter our quota of inept clerics in Mr. Crewe who “delivered inaudible sermons” and coached three students on the strength of “an arduous inacquaintance with Latin,”²⁰⁴ Mr. Smith who obviously devoted so much time to his poetry that “it might seriously intrench on his pastoral duties,”²⁰⁵ or in the reference to the extreme case of “the terrible drinkin’ fox-huntin’ man.”²⁰⁶

Although the people of Milby made a show of respect for the Sabbath by attention to the externals like details of costume, this “was unhappily counterbalanced by considerable levity of behaviour during the prayer and sermon.”²⁰⁷ We are also informed that “the standard of morality at Milby ... was not inconveniently high in those good old times.”²⁰⁸ The implication would be that former times might be viewed through rose-coloured spectacles, or equally that contemporary society was probably neither better nor worse than its predecessors. However there is tongue-in-cheek reference to the fine new railway as the symbol of progress, indicating that Milby had developed into an enlightened town.

The assessment of Mr. Tryan’s capacities by more perceptive minds was a positive one. Miss Pratt, the blue-stockings of the community, sums him up as:

a clergyman who unites all that is great and admirable in intellect with the highest spiritual gifts.²⁰⁹

²⁰³ *George Eliot’s Early Novels* p.79

²⁰⁴ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.253

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p.259

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p.308

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p.255

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p.257

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.* p.270

He also commands the respect of the philanthropic Mr. Jerome who epitomises the “religion of humanity.”

Whatever recommends itself to me, Thomas Jerome, as piety and goodness, shall have my love and honour. Ah, friends, this pleasant world is a sad one, too, isn't it? Let us help one another, let us help one another. ²¹⁰

He likewise sees Tryan as “a good man and a powerful preacher.”

George Eliot was at pains to point out that she is not necessarily advocating Evangelicalism in the person of Mr. Tryan. It just happens that he should be a representative of that particular tradition. In her other novels she may award the palm to men of a different confession. However this particular choice has more than the advantage of familiarity for her. Elisabeth Jay contends that this gave her the opportunity to use the idiom of that particular community to illustrate her own idea of religion as an active force.

By choosing to write about Evangelicals, George Eliot could appropriate the terminology of the Christian religion to present the quasi-religious humanism she had adopted from Feuerbach and Comte. ²¹¹

Tryan has a strong sense of his missionary calling.

God has sent me to this place, and, by His blessing, I'll not shrink from anything I may have to encounter in doing His work among the people. ²¹²

The image of the Christian martyr is suggested in Miss Pratt's reference to Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer. It is typically Christian charity in action that has the salutary effect upon Janet whose spirit was already willing but whose flesh was weak. The kind words

²¹⁰ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.305

²¹¹ *The Religion of the Heart* p.224

²¹² *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.308

of encouragement and sympathy offered to the dying Sally Martin are enough to alert a reluctant Janet to the healing quality which this clergyman carries about him.

Consequently in her own hour of need it is to Tryan that she has recourse. The personal tale, which Tryan, whom Knoepfmacher terms “the noble sinner,”²¹³ relates to explain his own conversion, is perhaps too much the prototype of the one who has reformed to testify to others. However, by this means, he is enabled to empathise with Janet and place himself alongside her in the role of the practical theologian who says:

In speaking to me you are speaking to a fellow sinner who has needed just the comfort and help you are needing.²¹⁴

Eliot accords a moving if predictable response to Janet as the outcome of Tryan’s confession.

God has been very good in sending you to me. I will trust in him.²¹⁵

Janet still has to undergo the dreadful experience of watching her brutal husband die a prolonged and horrible death aggravated by the effects of delirium tremens. With her enhanced strength she is empowered to do this and also to resist the renewed temptation of alcohol when she is left temporarily without a comforter.

For Tryan there is no fear in face of death,
--and to Mr. Tryan death had for years seemed nothing else than the laying down of a burthen.²¹⁶

Here, as on other occasions, we have resonances of *Pilgrim’s Progress* which are frequently present in Victorian literature either by direct allusion or in the reading matter and culture of the characters.

²¹³ *George Eliot’s Early Novels* p.80

²¹⁴ *Scenes of Clerical Life* p.356

²¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.364

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.404

The reformed Janet can contemplate the prospect of losing her beloved mentor without any trace of her previous rebellious spirit, “but rather in a quiet submissive sorrow.”²¹⁷ The only concession to the possibility of the idea of a hereafter comes in the sacred kiss of promise before Tryan’s death and in his words,

I shall not look for you in vain at the last.²¹⁸

We might conclude that Janet’s conversion through the human agency of Tryan suggests that it is due to the appeal of the singer rather than the song itself, although there is no blasphemous intent, for this is a preparation for sympathetic understanding of the Divine. Elisabeth Jay tellingly sums up Eliot’s working-out of the relationship in the following terms:

True to her Feuerbach-inspired concept of the Incarnation George Eliot then raises Tryan from a mere Evangelical guide and counsellor to a man whose practice of self-transcending love has made him one with God and, at the very close of the tale, we are shown Janet witnessing for Tryan rather than God.²¹⁹

The author chooses to quote one line of the Burial Service: **I am the Resurrection and the Life**, and to state without ambiguity that “the burial service was not a hollow form.”²²⁰ However Eliot’s theme of continuity of good works by those who follow after is instanced here in Janet’s new role. It is through her that Tryan’s work lives on. She herself is described as the true memorial. She serves as a monument to compassion as she keeps Tryan’s memory alive. The spiritual legacy of the individual is seen in the impact upon the lives of those with whom he has come in contact. George Eliot seems reluctant to go further, as we shall see in *Middlemarch*.

²¹⁷ *Scenes of Clerical Life*. p.408

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.410

²¹⁹ *The Religion of the Heart* p.63

²²⁰ *Scenes of Clerical Life*. p.411

Adam Bede

The personal qualities that a clergyman brings to his ministry have been shown to be of importance in the manner in which he performs his office. We remarked in Mr. Gilfil's case upon the sense of benediction, which seemed to be attached to his particular administration of the sacraments. The result was that his parishioners felt defrauded if they were deprived of his benevolent presence and had to make do with a substitute priest. The lack of personal charisma and of teaching technique demonstrated by Amos Barton places him at the bottom end of the scale. He had to be redeemed by the qualities of his helpmate and ultimately by his own suffering in bereavement.

In the Reverend Adolphus Irwine in *Adam Bede*, in contrast, we encounter one of George Eliot's most fascinating and successful creations. She makes it obvious from the first that she wants to endear him to her reader. Thus he is introduced in a happy domestic setting calculated to reveal his filial devotion to his equally charming mother, his fraternal love for his invalid sister, his patience with the local worthies (exemplified by Joshua Rann) and his easy-going friendship with Arthur Donnithorne, the squire's youthful heir. That we are dealing here with a consummate gentleman with no rough edges and with one who is comfortable in the presence of all classes of society is obvious from the start. There is also evidence of his ability to relate to his congregation and to accommodate their wishes. It is taken for granted that Adam Bede's father may be buried without question in the exact spot that his widow Lisbeth favours. Mr. Irwine readily acquiesces. His physical characteristics are in harmony with his social graces

It is very pleasant to see some men turn round...Mr. Irwine was one of those men...If the outline had been less finely cut, his face might have been called jolly; but that was not the right word for its mixture of bonhomie and distinction.²²¹

²²¹ *Adam Bede* p.56

He is presented as a distinguished, even aristocratic figure who enjoys the admiration and respect of those around him. He also shows serene tolerance of Dinah Morris's Methodist preaching and no sense of resentment of her intrusion into his parish.

What is it then that causes the author to make her story pause a little at the beginning of *Book Second* and debate with her reader?

“This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!” I hear one of my lady readers exclaim. “How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice.”²²²

The easy relationship obtaining between Mr. Irwine and Arthur Donnithorne dated from their days as tutor and pupil. However before Eliot's pause for reflection she had recounted a subtle, inconclusive conversation between the two. If the rector had persevered in his probing, or if Arthur had been more inclined to frank confession of his motives, the story might have taken a very different turn and the whole subsequent plot would have been aborted as a result. They seem to be discussing a hypothetical situation when Mr. Irwine suddenly focuses directly on his companion and poses a leading question: “Is it some danger of your own that you are considering in this philosophical, general way?” The question causes Donnithorne some embarrassment, for he is not ready to confess and be guided by the older man who had schooled him in the classics. Thus he contrives to give the conversation a different twist to frustrate the rector's kindly concern. The discussion has lost its impetus and the opportunity is lost. On this lost occasion the whole subsequent tragedy hangs. Eliot makes her hypothetical critical reader suggest:

“You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things——quite as good as reading a sermon.”²²³

²²² *Adam Bede* p.175

²²³ *Ibid.* p.175

However it is not George Eliot's intention to preach directly to her characters. When she wishes to achieve a particular effect, she can imitate or suggest the preaching style of any denomination. She has given indications of what she considers to be the recipe for an effective sermon in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. In *Adam Bede* she injects a note of authenticity by basing Dinah Morris's preaching on the text of John Wesley's first open-air sermon, Luke 4: 18, Jesus' manifesto for his mission to the poor and outcast. The aim is to bring sinners to repentance and conversion by direct appeal to the heart.

In contrast to the Methodist approach we find that Mr. Irwine, in keeping with the tradition of classically educated clergy, is more at home with the writings of the Greeks and Romans than with the Bible. In fact, Louis Rataboul sees him as an example of the secularised clergyman. We shall return to this assessment later in the context of Rataboul's critique.

As in other novels, Eliot makes use of the device of emphasising the passage of time that is supposed to have elapsed between the events of her story and the actual time of writing. This is a feature of her writing that John Lucas considers as a flaw.

He contends that what he terms as her "theoretical approach to history" damages rather than enhances her work, singling out *Adam Bede* and *Romola* for particular criticism.²²⁴

Louis Rataboul, on the other hand, is firmly of the opinion that Eliot makes effective use of allusions to a bygone age, suggesting that she is not prompted by mere nostalgia but by the analogies with the situation of her own period.

Pourtant, le témoignage de George Eliot, qui rejoint sur bien des points celui de Trollope, fait apparaître une réalité différente, laissant entendre que les situations du passé ne sont pas sans analogie avec celles du présent qu'elles expliquent et éclairent, et que le clergé d'une époque survit encore dans celle qui lui succède.²²⁵

²²⁴ *The Literature of Change* p.24

²²⁵ *Le Pasteur Anglican dans le Roman Victorien* p.113

In the case of Mr. Irwine this whole perspective of time forms part of Eliot's defence of his attitude. It also gives credence to the modified version of the exercise of the *droit de seigneur* that Donnithorne considers as normal behaviour for a gentleman of his station in life. Rataboul rightly contends that Eliot shrinks from idealising her character:

Elle se défend de donner du pasteur une image arbitraire et réaffirme sa volonté de ne peindre que la réalité historique dont elle peut témoigner.²²⁶

It is at this point that the author intervenes with her powerful argument for realism, honest portrayal of characters and events.

The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint and confused but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness box narrating my experience on oath.²²⁷

It is her very integrity as a writer that is at stake here and she is determined that her readers should be drawn into sympathetic understanding of human frailty. This is why she prefers Dutch art. She gives examples of simple Dutch or Flemish interiors: an old woman eating her solitary meal, a village wedding with an awkward bridegroom and a broad-faced bride, people with irregular features etc.

I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence.²²⁸

In this key chapter (XVII) the author sets out to balance her sense of the aesthetic against the claims of honest depiction of "that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion but in the secret of deep human sympathy."²²⁹ She had argued in the same way for the unvarnished portrayal of Amos Barton. Adolphus Irwine is also a flawed character but in a much less obvious way. There is nothing ugly in his person or

²²⁶ *Le Pasteur Anglican dans le Roman Victorien* p.114

²²⁷ *Adam Bede* p.175

²²⁸ *Ibid.* p.177

²²⁹ *Ibid.* p.178

nature. There is merely a lack of perseverance in his zeal to investigate and intervene, a certain dilettante *laissez faire* attitude, which, out of a sense of delicacy as much as of laziness, makes him reluctant to make the extra effort. As far as Hetty is concerned, we gather later that Mr. Irwine's sermons had little effect upon her in her youthful insouciance. However Irwine can scarcely shoulder the full blame for that, and he is ultimately stirred into positive action on behalf of his friends when the crisis comes. The sympathetic presentation of the Rector will impute only one type of sin to him, and that a simple sin of omission. Is he then to be termed ineffectual in his ministry on this one count? After all, he is perhaps the most sympathetically portrayed of all the twenty-nine clergymen whom Louis Rataboul identifies in seven of the novels. Once again we come face to face with the emphasis upon common Christian values put into practice in the exercise of love and charity to fellow human beings. Eliot excuses Mr. Irwine, as we have indicated, on the grounds that he is a reflection of the clergy of his theoretical past period. As Rataboul expresses it:

Mr. Irwine est bien le reflet d'une période où le clergé anglican, dans son ensemble, n'était guère épris de sainteté ni dévoré de zèle apostolique.²³⁰

George Eliot goes so far, in what Chesterton would term one of her "elaborate exculpations"²³¹ of her heroes, as to suggest that, had Mr. Irwine been one of the small number of zealous clergymen of his generation, her readers would not have warmed to him. She remarks:

Ten to one, you would have thought him a tasteless, indiscreet, methodistical man.²³²

Thus the reader's sympathy is enlisted, for as Rataboul concludes, Irwine is a shining example of the religion of the heart at work in the community.

²³⁰ *Le Pasteur Anglican* p.130

²³¹ *The Victorian Age in Literature* p.109

²³² *Adam Bede* p.175

La religion du coeur est bien la seule qui compte aux yeux de la romancière. Que peut-on demander de plus au recteur? ²³³

Eliot desires her reader “to be in perfect charity with Mr. Irwine”,²³⁴ echoing the invitation in the Prayer Book to those about to take the Sacrament. She had remarked in her introduction to Mr. Irwine: “However ill he harmonised with sound theories of the clerical office, he somehow harmonised with that peaceful landscape.”²³⁵ Here then was a clergyman who could cope more than adequately with everyday situations when the wheel of his community was turning smoothly, interrupted only by the change of seasons and the normal timely occurrence of birth, marriage and death. It is the intrusion of a jarring note in the order of society that disturbs the tranquil routine and renders the gentleman clergyman at least temporarily impotent. One might say that the time is out of joint.

When matters become critical, it requires the intervention of a more strongly evangelical figure in the person of Dinah Morris to penetrate the defensive barrier to Christian charity presented by Hetty Sorrel, “the poor castaway.” During the earlier part of the cousins’ relationship Hetty had felt little inclination for the spiritual counsel that Dinah had been keen to offer. In her hour of need Hetty’s resistance is eventually broken down by the power of Dinah’s presence and the simple way in which she approaches Hetty who appears like a frightened animal in need of reassurance. Dinah’s technique is that of quietly asserting her presence:

Hetty—Dinah is come to you.

Then she builds up her confidence with the promise of support:

I’m come to be with you, Hetty---not to leave you---to stay with you----to be your sister to the last.

²³³ *Le Pasteur Anglican* p.130

²³⁴ *Adam Bede* p.179

²³⁵ *Ibid.* p.70

Having gained the acceptance of her own presence, Dinah is ready to move on to spiritual matters and to speak at greater length. There has to be fairly subtle progression from the example of human love and devotion, which she herself presents to Hetty's dawning understanding of a divine presence. Dinah draws the analogy.

If you could believe he [God] loved you and would help you, as you believe I love you and will help you, it wouldn't be so hard to die on Monday, would it?²³⁶

However, although Hetty now finds herself pouring out a full confession of the sad events, she still needs the prop of Dinah's solidly reassuring earthly presence beside her in the cart heading for execution. One remains convinced that it is the human presence and strength of another that Hetty needs most of all. It is not the conversion story of *Janet's Repentance*. However Dinah has brought Hetty to the stage of full confession and human forgiveness of the one who has wronged her.

I hated him and cursed him once but Dinah says I should forgive him—and I try—for else God won't forgive me.²³⁷

Dinah is no clergyman in the ordinary sense. Oliver Lovesey refers to her as “a historically accurate representative of Methodist women preachers” and also identifies an important function for Dinah, who “voices the Methodist belief that England was in a state of religious crisis due to clerical laxity.”²³⁸ It is significant for the period that Dinah, who had been so fervent in her preaching, is constrained historically by the Annual Conference of Preachers, the governing body of Wesleyan Methodists, to give up preaching since she is a woman. But that is not the only reason. Dinah has submitted voluntarily.

²³⁶ *Adam Bede* p.449

²³⁷ *Ibid.* p.461

²³⁸ *The Clerical Character in George Eliot's Fiction* p. 39

She thought it right to set the example o' submitting for she's not held from other sorts o' teaching.²³⁹

The time is not ripe, one senses, even by the time George Eliot was writing, for the woman to have anything but a personal loving influence and to teach by example. Dinah retires from the active scene to become a wife and mother and exercise her influence on the domestic front. For the modern reader there is perhaps a sense of anti-climax inherent in this development, but we shall see a similar phenomenon at work much more poignantly in the destiny of a very different woman, Dorothea in *Middlemarch*.

Of the two deaths that we encounter in *Adam Bede*, one is a sudden accident brought on by the effects of alcohol, the other the distant passing of the unfortunate Hetty Sorrel who is destined to die just before she was due to be released and restored to society. The legacy of Bede's death is that of hard work and continued responsibility for his sons and the need to care and provide for their querulous mother. In Hetty's case we had approached the threshold of death at the moment when she expected to be executed. We last see her alive with Dinah in the cart, "the trembling creature that clung to her and clutched her as the only visible sign of love and pity."²⁴⁰

The actual moment of her death is passed over in silence, and we know not the day or the hour. Therefore there is no lasting memorial to Hetty. The only legacy is sorrow, although the "moral magnanimity"²⁴¹ to which John Lucas refers with reference to *Adam Bede* implies that Hetty will be kindly and generously remembered by those who loved her. In no way is she the outcast of society in the mould of a Thomas Hardy character, for her return to the fold would not have been unwelcome.

²³⁹ *Adam Bede* p.539

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.462

²⁴¹ *The Literature of Change* p.88

The author's expression of the foundation of the union of Adam and Dinah presents the equivalent of the traditional Christian marriage vows and offers easily recognisable parallels in Eliot's wording.

What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life—to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?²⁴²

Life will end with a looking back and taking stock of past shared experiences. The only sense of continuity will be found in the impact of these lives upon society.

We now come to a discussion of some aspects of the novel that illustrates Eliot's view of a lasting personal memorial most explicitly, namely *Middlemarch*.

Middlemarch

This novel with its lavish canvas presents us with a rich assortment of clergymen, but we shall concentrate our attention upon only two of them, Casaubon and Farebrother.

We are forewarned in the first chapter that Dorothea Brooke, reared on the writings of Jeremy Taylor, John Bunyan, Pascal and Keble, was "likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it."

Prior to that, in the *Prelude*, the reader is reminded of the legend of Saint Theresa with her innate idealism. The author proclaims a truth she is about to illustrate:

Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion.²⁴³

²⁴² *Adam Bede* p.532

²⁴³ *Middlemarch*, *Prelude* p.3

George Eliot will come full circle and recur to this theme in her finale after skilfully interweaving the lives of her characters to form the web of providence and circumstance in which they become entangled.

The idealistic Dorothea's initial impression of the Reverend Edward Casaubon, the unprepossessing middle-aged clergyman, whom her practical sister saw all too clearly, was that of "a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint."²⁴⁴ She even imagines that union with him would be "like marrying Pascal."²⁴⁵ Disillusion comes quickly when marriage becomes a reality.

From the point of view of this study Casaubon has two important roles, that of a representative of the clergy and also as a character whose death impinges upon the life of others and carries with it a legacy of suffering. In the first of these roles he emerges as the type of the religious scholar *manqué*, caught in a time warp, unable to move forward and equally unable to penetrate the ancient mysteries to which he claims to have found the key. Nineteenth century biblical criticism and research was making enormous progress, especially in Germany. Albert Schweitzer attributed this phenomenon to the remarkable qualities of intellect inherent in German scholars.

Unfortunately German was not one of Casaubon's languages, and therefore important sources remained untapped. The scope of his proposed work was too ambitious for one of his limited ability, and his manner of setting about it lacked method and vision. The task that he proposed for his talented and enthusiastic young bride was that of a humble secretary. Dorothea had deluded herself into thinking that this was to be an important undertaking and would gladly have submitted to "the command of an authority that

²⁴⁴ *Middlemarch* p.27

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.31

constrained her conscience,”²⁴⁶ as Saint Theresa had done, if she had had a guide and mentor worthy of her discipleship.

What lamp was there but knowledge? Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon?²⁴⁷

Disillusionment had already set in during the honeymoon in Rome where Dorothea was left to her own devices while Casaubon ostensibly devoted himself to learned research among the archives.

Casaubon was a man of considerable wealth with a handsome but gloomy property independent of the church. The new environment in which Dorothea was expected to live held little attraction for her lively mind, for at Lowick she found “no looms here, no Dissent.”²⁴⁸ The claustrophobic existence of the library finds no relief in the parish itself, for she would have preferred “that her home would be in a parish which had a larger share of the world’s misery, so that she might have more active duties in it.”²⁴⁹ Thus Casaubon belongs to the class of gentlemen clergy but he appears to have none of the virtues of Mr. Irwine in *Adam Bede* or of his fellow clergyman, Camden Farebrother.

His second and more important function in the novel lies in the lasting effect and legacy of his life and death upon the continuing existence of his widow, Dorothea. Having come to terms with the humiliating involvement in *The Key to all Mythologies*, Dorothea finds herself married to an ageing, selfish and unsympathetic husband whose jealous nature hits upon a plan to control her actions and frustrate her happiness after his

²⁴⁶ *Middlemarch* p.94

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p.95

²⁴⁸ Ibid. p.84

²⁴⁹ Ibid. p.85

death. He betrays lamentable distrust of a nature much nobler than his own. The “dead hand” controls from the grave, and it is only by giving up what is rightfully hers that Dorothea succeeds in shaking off the cold and constant reminder of her unhappiness.

Another character who dies in this book prides himself on the impact that the disposal of his estate will have upon those who hope to inherit. Old Featherstone lingers on and places the honest Mary Garth in a difficult position when he expects her to take a hand in altering his will at the last moment. Mary, a sterling character, refuses to be party to anything that smacks of dishonesty, for Featherstone had also offered her money. The change of testament would also have benefited Fred Vincy who hopes to marry Mary, and thus by her integrity she has done both Fred and herself a disservice. The old gentleman relishes the thought that the reading of his will is bound to shock his greedy relatives. However the manner in which this particular dead hand reaches out does not compare with the depth of distress and abhorrence that Casaubon was to occasion for Dorothea.

Eliot pauses at one point before Casaubon’s death to soften the portrait and invoke the reader’s sympathy on behalf of this purblind specimen of humanity. She advises us that “Mr. Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us.”²⁵⁰

In addition he has a weak constitution which has not afforded him much enjoyment of life.

He had not had much foretaste of happiness in his previous life. To know intense joy without a strong bodily frame, one must have an enthusiastic soul.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ *Middlemarch* p.310

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* p.311

It is the latter quality in which he is significantly lacking in contrast to his wife. The *mésalliance* resulted from misapprehension, since Casaubon had chosen Dorothea because he thought her ideally equipped for his purposes. She could provide him with the “domestic delights” that he craved, as well as serving as secretary to preserve his failing eyesight. His lack of consideration for others, his self-centred attitude and his obscure research combine to alienate him from his wife and from local society.

Although he has knowledge of the nature of his illness, this does not prompt him to prepare himself and his wife for the inevitable. Dr. Lydgate is sworn to respect his medical confidence. Thus when he dies, it comes as a crippling shock to Dorothea. The traumatic effect of finding his body is compounded by the fact that she was due to give her answer to his request that she should promise to carry out his wishes in the event of his death. She had not replied immediately since “many incidents had been leading her to the conjecture of some intention on her husband’s part to make a new yoke for her.”²⁵² The interval during which she made up her mind to submit was sufficient for the onset of the fatal heart attack, and no further human communication between them was possible.

Thus Dorothea was left with the legacy of her husband’s suspicion. When she discovers about the codicil to the will, she experiences revulsion and humiliation at the thought of his secrecy and suspicion. The revelation also had the unexpected effect of awakening her unsuspected feelings for Will Ladislav, for her husband’s jealous action had contrived to precipitate the very situation that he had plotted to prevent. Thus Casaubon leaves a legacy of bitterness behind him on two scores. Despite Dorothea’s loyal attempt to work on *The Key to All Mythologies*, there was no way forward and the work remained in embryo form. More significantly, any residual affection that she

²⁵² *Middlemarch* p.530

cherished for him was effectively killed off, and she remained in an emotionally wounded state for a long time. We shall return to Dorothea's own legacy to posterity in the final section of this study. In the meantime we turn to a brief discussion of the Reverend Camden Farebrother.

Mr. Farebrother shares common ground with Mr. Irwine in *Adam Bede*. He is a single gentleman living happily with his amiable mother, aunt and sister. He also has a taste for the finer things of life, which he can ill afford as vicar of St. Botolph's, a poor living. His weaknesses, a liking for billiards and card games with the added attraction of gambling, are not such as to deter the reader, but Eliot indicates that gambling activities can cause serious problems for weaker characters like Fred Vincy.

A significant aspect of Mr. Farebrother is his preoccupation with Natural History, particularly with entomology. His enthusiasm for collecting specimens is in keeping with the spirit of the age and the historical examples of scientifically minded clergymen that we mentioned near the beginning of this study. This hobby also gives him an interesting point of contact with Lydgate, the progressive young doctor whose experimentation is of a more wholesome and potentially useful nature than that of Hardy's Dr. Fitzpiers. Farebrother does not suffer any spiritual crisis as a result of his scientific research which he seems to be able to keep in a separate compartment of his mind. He is presented as a gifted preacher but "too lax for a clergyman."²⁵³

Dr. Lydgate, who finds him a congenial companion very much to his taste, sums up in an understatement:

I don't pretend to say that Farebrother is apostolic—his position is not quite like that of the Apostles.²⁵⁴

²⁵³ *Middlemarch* p.569

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p.550

In fact, Farebrother has more than a hint of the secular about him and can become totally absorbed in his non-clerical occupations to the extent that Lydgate senses “that the vicar felt himself not altogether in the right vocation.”²⁵⁵ In an age when second sons often trained for the ministry as a tradition, it is inevitable that a sense of vocation was frequently lacking. Farebrother and Mary Garth contrive to dissuade a much less suitable candidate, Fred Vincy, from entering a profession, for which he had no inclination.

Of course, if I’m obliged to be a clergyman, I shall try and do my duty, though I may not like it. Do you think anybody ought to blame me?²⁵⁶

However, in Farebrother’s case, when ecclesiastical advancement and a welcome addition of stipend come along, one joins with his mother in feeling that it is not undeserved, for he has undeniably endearing qualities, which amply compensate for any lack of apostolic zeal, and above all he knows himself well.

Few men who feel the pressure of small needs are so nobly resolute not to dress up their inevitably self-interested desires in a pretext of better motives.²⁵⁷

If one needs any further proof of the finer qualities of his nature, it is to be found in the renunciation of his love for Mary Garth to leave the way open for Fred Vincy to woo her. For this reason alone Louis Rataboul would class him as “un apôtre de la religion du coeur.”²⁵⁸ The modest aspirations of this gentle churchman are expressed succinctly

²⁵⁵ *Middlemarch* p.192

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p.569

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.197

²⁵⁸ *Le Pasteur Anglican dans le Roman Victorien* p. 125

by his friend Doctor Lydgate, the progressive medical practitioner, with whom he shares a sympathetic understanding:

He is only a parson among parishioners whose lives he has to try and make better. ²⁵⁹

This is surely the link between the healer of the body and the would-be healer of souls. Both are seen as practical vocations. They deal realistically with life and death situations and bring to their task the talents of intellect and spirit with which they are gifted, for with Eliot the effective virtue lies in the blessed qualities of the beatitudes translated into actions which will not necessarily aspire to their heavenly reward.

²⁵⁹ *Middlemarch* p.550

Chapter 5: The Writers' Verdict

**There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.²⁶⁰**

With our three Victorian authors we have come a long way from the early idealised view of the pastor as “the deputy of Christ” expressed by George Herbert.²⁶¹ Jeremy Taylor’s spiritual preparation of men and women for a good death, in which he places emphasis upon a godly life, has retained its resonance for Trollope and Eliot and for the characters they create, possibly the best example being Trollope’s Septimus Harding. Charles Reade’s picture of the priest fulfilling his vocation best by ministering to the dying has been put severely to the test in the works of the authors whom we have studied, especially in the case of Thomas Hardy.

Let us consider how the question of life after death has been resolved or avoided in an age where religious doubt was now considered the acceptable reaction of the thinking man or woman who had imbibed the philosophical and scientific scholarship of the period. George Eliot, who had become very familiar with the thought processes of Strauss during her long months of translation, was ultimately disappointed when he seemed to renege on some of his earlier conclusions and retreated to a more conventional position. She had been captured by his early enthusiasm and pursued her own system of thought with the added ingredients of a brand of Auguste Comte’s Positivism and Feuerbach’s view of religion as a response to a psychological need. Although she formally rejected Christianity as a doctrine, she remained firmly entrenched in her use of Christian imagery and biblical language. Legendary figures of Christendom are also present as signposts and brought forward as examples-----

²⁶⁰ *In Memoriam* xcv (published 1850), printed in full in *The English Parnassus* (1947) p.547 et alibi.

²⁶¹ *A Priest to the Temple* (1652), Works of George Herbert, Second Edition Volume I, p.3

Augustine, Pascal, Saint Theresa etc. She cannot dispense with her whole Christian culture in the same way that she can abandon belief in its dogma. In fact it provides the whole basis for her own version of the religion of the heart.

In *Scenes of Clerical Life* we witnessed a deeply moving Christian deathbed scene in which the dying woman seemed to depart this life for the bliss of Heaven, although one notes that her clergyman husband remains firmly rooted in this world and is excluded from sharing her spiritual vision. In Eliot's later novels we have no such comforting parallels. The deaths in *Middlemarch* are characterised by the effect that they have upon those who remain behind in this world. We have discussed the control exercised by the dead hand of Casaubon. There is no spiritual lesson to be learned here. Casaubon was dead in practically every sense, from the moment we encountered him. Consequently his work did not live after him.

However when we come to the closing section of the book, we are very much concerned with the survival of the essence of Dorothea herself for posterity. In *Janet's Repentance* we already had the example of someone who lived on and embodied the work and aspirations of another character in the good life that she led in her latter years. Eliot had already hinted at the outset in *Middlemarch* that there was disappointment and disillusionment in store in this life for those who set out with idealistic intent as Saint Theresa did of old.

The words of the Reverend Frederick Robertson from a sermon preached in the last decade of the nineteenth century seem appropriate here.

There is something exquisitely painful in the thought that we die out and are forgotten; therefore it is, that in the higher walks of life people solace themselves with the hope of posthumous reputation; they think, perhaps, that *then* only their true worth will be known.²⁶²

²⁶² Sermon: *Views of Death* preached at Brighton in 1898 from *Sermons by the Rev. F. Robertson*.

Casaubon had assuredly hoped that his magnum opus would survive after his death and make his reputation. With Dorothea it is a question of something much subtler. As the author points out, the world's view is seldom a charitable one. She had bitter experience of this with reference to her own ambivalent position in society due to her irregular relationship with G. H. Lewes. She suggests that the unenlightened would mete out a harsh judgment on Dorothea.

Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been "a nice woman."²⁶³

However the reader has had the advantage of closely following the vicissitudes of Dorothea's life recounted by one who claims to be an honest and precise witness to events. The author concedes: "Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful." Part of the explanation of what might be deemed a disappointing harvest in a life that had showed such early promise is to be found in the changes in society wrought by the march of time and by man's altered view of the universe. Eliot reverts to her Christian and classical heroines, Saint Theresa and Antigone, and affirms that "the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone."²⁶⁴ We should perhaps reduce the scale and place greater emphasis on more mundane outcomes.

Dorothea's claim to immortality, her lasting reputation, is to be judged by the influence for good that she exerted on those around her and consequently on posterity. She is seen ultimately as one of "the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." On such, Eliot contends, depends "the growing good of the world."²⁶⁵ This is certainly not immortality viewed in traditional Christian terms. It

²⁶³ *Middlemarch*, Finale p.924

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p.924

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.924

comes nearer to a classical humanist conception of death as perpetual sleep or personal extinction, where only a memorable life's work can survive. Yet with Eliot the issue is not so clearly defined. She gives expression to her thoughts in a poem where she seems to aspire to a more lasting memorial and sense of survival of the spirit.

**O may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence: live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge man's search
To vaster issues.²⁶⁶**

She also shares with Jeremy Taylor the insistence on the value of a good life, although she is meticulous in her depiction of imperfections in her characters. Her clergymen have the potential to help those in need by practical acts of kindness, and she retains a sympathetic understanding of the role of the Evangelical who has the power to convert the sinner and save him/her from a self-destructive way of life. Her Church of England clergymen can be valued as scholars (Mr. Cleves, Mr. Irwine) or as sympathisers with scientific research and evolutionary theory (Mr. Farebrother). She shares with Hardy a notion of continuity which bears some resemblance to the lasting memorial described at the end of *The Woodlanders* when Marty South carries on the work of Giles Winterborne as part of the great organic continuity of nature.

Unlike Hardy's, Eliot's characters seldom find their lives permanently stunted or frustrated by the attitude of the clergy. Certainly we have the negative impact of Amos Barton's uncharitable treatment of the inmates of the workhouse. However Amos does not act out of malice. He is misled by his limited understanding of theology and is redeemed only by firsthand experience and by awakening to the realisation that all

²⁶⁶ *Jubal; and Other Poems* p.301-3

along he had been living with one who had exemplified Christian love and forbearance. He had been entertaining his domestic angel unawares.

Thomas Hardy's clergyman in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is very much the victim of dogma and of the ecclesiastical system. His inclination is to yield to a desperate human need but he lacks the moral courage to break free from the fetters of his perceived duty to the church. The legalistic view triumphs but his struggles of conscience cause him to give out a confusing message. Tess emerges as the better theologian herself and cuts the Gordian knot by her bold assumption of the role of priestess in baptising her own child and contriving an approximation to a Christian memorial at the grave.

Several of Hardy's characters place themselves outside the accepted moral bounds of Christian society and forfeit the respect and consideration of those who subscribe to conventional values. Hardy's indictment of the church as an institution is severe. In theory the sacraments remain open to those who believe in the Lord. However, if they can be administered only by an ordained clergyman who considers himself bound by his vows to exclude those who do not qualify, the practical role of the church as the body of Christ becomes a mockery, for Jesus Christ himself welcomed the outcast and the sinner. Hardy's characters who have ventured beyond the pale of conventional morality find themselves constrained to reinvent religious formulas to fit their needs. Even Henchard, surely the most miserable solitary sinner upon his deathbed, cannot dispense with the vocabulary of the Christian religion in his grim testament. It is, of course, as we have stressed, the complete denial and converse of the Burial Service, but the will echoes the solemn rhythms of the liturgy. Even in the contradiction of its clauses the tradition remains alive.

Jude's death scene was accompanied by the cries of the suffering Job in the period before God came to his aid with enlightening wisdom. The Job whom Jude recognises is the one who asked:

Why died I not from the womb?

Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?²⁶⁷

By contrast there is an element of hope and continuity at the end of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Despite the death of the heroine there is a promise of a renewed world and a sense of resurrection in the tentative relationship of Angel and Liza-Lu. Nevertheless it is still to be viewed against the background of the sacrifice and suffering of one who had been more intensely spiritual at some points than any representative of the Christian church.

Is life after death or any concept of immortality to be viewed merely in the sense of a memorial upon earth? Was the immortality of the woman with the alabaster jar simply a survival of her reputation dependent upon one generous action? Was the original Christian view of the resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgement a bygone tradition for many in the nineteenth century?

Other authors outside the scope of this study rely on the imagery of the *Book of Revelation* which they develop and adapt to their own purposes to form a dramatic deathbed vision. Children's deaths are characterised by descriptions reminiscent of artists' renderings of heaven; for example William's death in *East Lynne* draws heavily upon John Martin's *The Plains of Heaven*. There is also the domestic imagery of the idealised English countryside with its comforting familiarity to allay deathbed fears of the unknown. This theme derives its inspiration from the pastoral metaphor of Psalm 23 *The Lord is my shepherd*, which is evoked and developed in funeral hymns.

²⁶⁷ Job 3: 11 KJV

As Great Britain prided itself on being a maritime nation, the sea of life also features in hymns such as *Abide with me*.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day—

There is also the notion of death as the destination of life's pilgrimage popularised by John Bunyan and repeated in many 19th century hymns, for example in *Whither, pilgrims, are you going?*

We shall drink of life's clear river

We shall dwell with God for ever

In that bright and better land.²⁶⁸

In the depiction of Septimus Harding's death Trollope contrives an uncomplicated formula with a mere hint of what lies beyond.

I know how rich and strong is that other life.²⁶⁹

Here he dispenses with the sharper tools of his trade, the satirical wit that marked his description of the death of the alcoholic Sir Roger Scatcherd in *Dr. Thorne*. The Rev. F. Robertson suggests, in the sermon that we quoted earlier:

In our short-sightedness we think there ought to be a certain correspondence between the man and the mode of the man's death.²⁷⁰

He goes on to point out that this seldom happens, much in the same vein as Jeremy Taylor had indicated in his references to deaths in classical literature. In the case of Mr. Harding, contrary to form, the correspondence actually applies. The account of his death is spread over a period. He has time to take stock and prepare himself for "holy dying." Attachment to the things of this world gradually diminishes. At first he betrays a lively interest in the fate of the Rev. Josiah Crawley. Finally he no longer has the energy to touch his beloved cello, and his weariness even in the presence of his cherished

²⁶⁸ *Golden Chain* 1861

²⁶⁹ *The Last Chronicle of Barset* p.848

²⁷⁰ See note 262 above.

granddaughter warns that the end is near. His concern with his nearest and dearest is bound up with his perception of heaven, and he wonders if he will be able to watch over them like a guardian angel. The expression of his thoughts becomes perceptibly more spiritual until he bids his final farewell: "There is nothing left for me to wish."²⁷¹ Finally the watchers see that he is praying every now and then. He dies appropriately communing with his God.

Trollope leaves us in no doubt that this was a flawed human being with minor foibles, but his account of the death scene is restrained and sensitively handled, so that there will be no hint of exaggeration. The legacy of deep grief is present, shown in the breaking of the bond between Harding and his beloved daughter, Eleanor and in the almost immediate subsequent death of John Bunce, who had clung tenaciously to life in sustained loyalty to the former Warden. Harding's actual achievement, like that of Eliot's Dorothea, might appear small but the impact of his near saintly personality upon others was considerable. His gentle epitaph informs the reader that Barchester "never knew a sweeter gentleman or a better Christian."²⁷² In many respects his life accorded with Chaucer's description of the poor parson in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, for he was certainly "benigne" and "in adversitee ful pacient."²⁷³ Chaucer's introduction to this devout priest refers to him as an example no less than three times. His definition of the good clergyman, in sharp contrast to the other unworthy representatives whom he describes, could equally apply to the type of Septimus Harding.

**Wel oghte a preest ensample for to yive,
By his clenness, how that his sheep shold live.**²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ *The Last Chronicle of Barset* p.774

²⁷² *Ibid.* p.776

²⁷³ *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* l.485-6

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.* lines 507-8

Harding has the advantage both of representing the church and of providing the nearest approach to the good death that we have encountered. In Victorian society it had become the custom to publish accounts of exemplary deaths. Gladstone, for instance, produced an account of the last days of his beloved mother. There were many edifying memorials to children who had apparently died in the faith with little regret at the premature ending of their brief lives. They had been schooled in the conviction that Heaven offered perpetual joy and relief from all earthly suffering. Many of the hymns of the period reflect this belief with the promise of a happy return to the heavenly home.

**Christ is waiting to receive us
in that brighter better land.**²⁷⁵

Thus it became possible for families to accept the loss of precious children in the framework of a society that had adapted itself to a pattern of constant preparation for death and a highly organised system of mourning which pervaded all aspects of existence.

If we return to Dr. Lydgate's assessment of Mr. Farebrother in *Middlemarch*,
He is only a parson among parishioners whose lives he has to try to make better.²⁷⁶
we may perhaps have an inkling of the kind of modified view that both Eliot and Trollope present of the good clergyman. Other works of the period present the Christian Socialist, the hard-working pastor who associates closely with a working community and serves in a practical way, like Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Augusta Ward's *Robert Elsmere* represents the problem of the borderline between being a clergyman and feeling constrained to abandon one's calling in order to achieve an authentic vocation, unfettered by the church's strictures.

²⁷⁵ *Golden Chain* 1861

²⁷⁶ *Middlemarch* p.550

In the real life situation the apparent clash of intellect and modern scholarship in the face of outworn beliefs, which could no longer be backed up, caused confusion and disillusionment in some areas. Clergymen adopted various solutions, none wholly satisfactory. Robertson concludes his sermon on “Views of Death” with the assertion that wisdom and scholarship cannot provide a complete answer to the divine mystery.

Hence it lies in a pure heart much more than in a clever intellect, to understand the mystery of life and death. Solomon’s wisdom has left us only a confused idea.²⁷⁷

The language of the Book of Common Prayer and of the Bible itself, especially the King James version, remained a potent influence. Writers have sought refuge in the imagery to convey the ineffable, which may be sensed but not properly understood. It remains like Saint Mark’s allusion to the parable with a sense of mystery for those who remain outside,

ἵνα βλέποντες βλέπωσιν καὶ μὴ ἴδωσιν, καὶ ἀκούοντες ἀκούωσιν καὶ μὴ συνιῶσιν

(4: 12)

The Pisgah view afforded to Moses, who was destined never to enter the Promised Land, remains an effective image to convey the unknown destination after this life. Isaac Watts was only one of the many who used this in his hymn, “There is a land of pure delight.”

**Could we but climb where Moses stood,
And view the landscape o’er,
Not Jordan’s stream nor death’s cold flood,
Should fright us from the shore.**

Thus writers present us, at one end of the spectrum, with the portrayal of the good pastor, who models his life as closely as he can on an imitation of Christ. He ministers to the poor and afflicted in the most practical way possible, as do Eliot’s Tryan and Mrs. Humphry Ward’s Robert Elsmere, when they have found their true

²⁷⁷ *Sermons preached at Trinity Chapel Brighton* (note 262)

vocation. This realisation of the Christian example does not depend upon intellectual consent to the Thirty-nine Articles or to the standard of confession applicable to any particular denomination.

The other end of the spectrum presents us with the continued use of the visionary and apocalyptic language of the Bible, as its imagery and stories are re-appropriated for the expression of a new form of spirituality. The sinful mortality of Adam and Eve remains a powerful symbol of humanity's inability either to come to terms with its relationship with God or to be self-sufficient and survive without God. The example of the Cross is constantly brought before us representing God's intervention in the human catastrophe. Writers have re-created the great biblical scenes, so that the whole canvas is wiped clean, the layers of accumulated tradition reassessed, and fresh colours are applied to renew the life of the whole enterprise. Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones can be reclothed in flesh, but it is not the original flesh or the traditional acceptance of a reconstitution of the physical body.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the Christian Church had become so fragmented that there was little uniformity of belief within any one denomination concerning issues of life and death. Literature, at this point, finds itself better equipped to confront the mysteries of the survival of the human soul than any scientific exploration. Most people had long since ceased to think in terms of an imminent Parousia. Hence the idea of contributing personally to the survival of the species and to the welfare and continuity of our own universe was an important issue. It became more openly a matter of individual belief concerning one's destination beyond the grave. The threat of hell was seen as a useful deterrent for controlling public morals. The promise of heaven, as we have suggested, made the high rate of mortality in Victorian urban society more tolerable for those who had no problem with belief in an afterlife.

Unsettling influences—philosophical, political, scientific and industrial—had precipitated a shift in understanding, which had already started in the eighteenth century, in a more educated and culturally aware society. The accelerated pace of living and the more fully realised perspective of history had both contributed to a less facile acceptance of traditional doctrines. Casting one's mind forward from the Victorian period to the First World War with its appalling carnage, one sees that the ecclesiastical institution had not moved in step with the times. The padres of the trenches were inadequate to cope with human fear and suffering on such a grand scale and with the ancient question of theodicy first formulated by Boethius: *Si Deus justus—unde malum?* Theologians have struggled with the great issues of life and death, good and evil, over many centuries, but the nineteenth century with its massive developments in science, technology, industrialisation, urbanisation, education etc. was surely the critical point. It was then that some religious thinkers had the courage to admit that the status quo was permanently undermined and that an honest reappraisal of issues of faith and doubt must be made.

By the late twentieth century theology had been fearlessly and openly aired to the extent that Professor Robert Davidson could entitle one of his books *The Courage to Doubt*. Doubt came to be seen as a positive quality which would be examined and analysed, and which could ultimately provide a new source of strength for a crumbling faith. The great religious debaters of the nineteenth century, the Tractarians of the thirties, and later F. D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, J. M. Ludlow and others opened up the way for more critical examination of issues of faith.

Literature has provided the more picturesque material that has influenced the minds of many who would not profess to be Christians but who find solace in shared values and ideals.

We turn again to George Eliot's poem, *O may I join the choir invisible*, which defines the highest ideal to which a human being may strive in serving others.

**This is life to come,
Which martyred men have made more glorious
For us who strive to follow. May I reach
That purest heaven, be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardour, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty—
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
And in diffusion ever more intense
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world.**

There lingers here a vision of an immortality which draws upon the Christian tradition. This is one of the ways in which these dry bones may still live. The Hope of the Resurrection may no longer remain unquestioned, but it can be redefined to bring peace of mind and a sense of fulfilment in mortal life.

Epilogue

Callum Brown maintains that genuine secularisation did not take place until the 1960s. Although he has traced the development of nineteenth century religious malaise, he concludes that this gradual process did not signify the imminent demise of the Christian religion. He writes:

The result was not the long, inevitable religious decline of the conventional secularisation story but a remarkably sudden and culturally violent event.²⁷⁸

However if we revert to Trollope's late nineteenth century novel *The Way We Live Now*, and consider it as an authentic reflection of its time, we must conclude that the seeds of the decline of institutionalised religion were well and truly sown. We remarked in the section of this study concerning Trollope that the church represented a peripheral presence in this novel, and the author, whose consistent interest in the clergy is unlikely to have waned, would certainly not have understated the phenomenon. Mere church attendance figures hardly convey the whole picture. Brown acknowledges the presentation in Victorian literature of clergymen wracked by religious doubts: "In Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, crises of faith were inherent elements in the religiosity of men." He speaks of "the weakness of 'holy men'" being "publicly paraded" in Victorian novels.²⁷⁹ He also cites Trollope as one who exposed the power of the novel as an educative and persuasive medium, especially in serialised form in magazines, often religious ones. Thus the novels in which clergymen figured had a dual function. They reflected, as both Trollope and George Eliot assure us, the attitudes and practices of genuine contemporary clergymen. They also pressed home an indication of what the authors saw as the effective function of the clergyman among his

²⁷⁸ *The Death of Christian Britain* pp.175-6

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p.107

parishioners. Trollope, Hardy and Eliot all portray clergymen as fallible and frequently inadequate in their response to human need.

It is in the context of death that Christ's deputy is most severely tested, both in ministering to the dying and in reassuring the bereaved. Eliot's Mr. Gilfil successfully comforted his flock but had to suppress his personal grief by burying it and sacrificing the vitality of his nature to achieve peace of mind in a life of uninspired mediocrity. Mr. Tryan, in his years in Milby, exemplified the good life and led sinners to repentance, but in so doing consumed his strength and died almost a martyr's death. Of all the clergymen in this study only Septimus Harding emerges really well. Despite his characteristic shortcomings he succeeds in tending his little flock, ministering to the dying and finally achieving in his own person the good death described by Jeremy Taylor in *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*. He contrives to fulfil all the requirements of the good pastor in his dying words, for he comforts the bereaved and obeys Saint Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians in advocating no extremes of grief. He also states firmly his personal belief in the Christian hope beyond the grave.

I know how poor and weak has been my life, but I know how rich and strong is that other life. Do not cry, Nelly---not till I am gone; and then not beyond measure. Why should anyone weep for those who go away full of years---and full of hope?²⁸⁰

We conclude that if we were to attempt an amalgam of the message of our three authors, it would emphasise the fact that clergymen should not be expected to be superior to ordinary mortals, since they are subject to the same temptations and failings. The general decline of faith in the nineteenth century is certainly not wholly attributable to the clergy. Congregations had become much less ready to accept received wisdom and imposed dogma. Educated laymen had become more willing to grapple with religious issues and apply their powers of reasoning. This is the more positive aspect of

²⁸⁰ *The Last Chronicle of Barset* p.848

doubt. The central tenet of the Christian faith, belief in the Resurrection, having been treated in a more critical manner by nineteenth century biblical scholars, was now viewed by many in purely symbolic terms. The assurance that the bones of generations of Christians buried in the churchyard would be raised again physically on the Day of Judgement had long since lost its force. The phrase “the resurrection of the flesh” had caused difficulties in doctrinal controversies as early as the second century. C. F. Evans reminds us that “frequent recourse was had to the text ‘With God all things are possible’ to argue that God was able to reassemble the physical body for resurrection however dispersed.”²⁸¹ The shift to a more pragmatic approach in the nineteenth century is demonstrated by the opening up of extensive cemeteries outside church precincts and by the eventual acceptance of cremation.

Our three authors did not reject the notion of some form of survival of the individual after death. Human experience is too valuable to be totally discarded without passing on some of the accumulated tradition of learning. Christian ethics are clearly defined and appropriated by Trollope and preserved by Eliot. Hardy, for his part, indicates the gulf between the enactment of theology, as perceived by the church as an institution, and the mediation of the divine solace needed by the outcast and the broken-hearted. For an explicit statement of eschatological import we have to look elsewhere, but the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian New Testament are omnipresent in the novels. The interpretation wavers but the age-old images are there and the book is left open for the reader to imbibe and to redefine according to personal understanding.

We asked at the outset of our discussion whether the established church could be found guilty for the decline in faith and the emergence of doubt in the nineteenth century. We also questioned whether the clergy were fulfilling their spiritual role as

²⁸¹ *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* p.503

ministers to the dying and bereaved. The answers, which we gleaned from our samples of Victorian literature must remain complex and inconclusive. Unquestioning literal belief in traditional doctrines had largely given way to a more critical acceptance among thinking and educated people. The stress in Victorian novels upon the depiction of the inherent fallibility of clergymen and upon the spiritual crises to which few individuals are immune, opened up the way to a more honest appraisal of issues of faith and doubt. There was little that could be deemed “sure and certain” any more in a society which had undergone massive changes with the accelerated tempo of the nineteenth century. Consequently the understanding of death and resurrection was subjected to a wider interpretation to accommodate less rigorous and orthodox views, some of which verged on the humanist perception. The positive aspect of this development was the anticipation of a more liberal theology and of an approach which treated the confrontation of doubt as a strength rather than a weakness. One might envisage some of the nineteenth century writers and theologians as the forerunners of the “Honest to God” school of the nineteen-sixties represented by John Robinson or even of subsequent more radical thinkers such as Richard Holloway.

τι ζητετε τον ζωντα μετα των νεκρων;²⁸²

(Why do you seek the living among the dead?)

Anthony Trollope consigns Septimus Harding’s spirit to his God in his last silent prayer from which the reader is excluded. Harding’s faith assures him that he is going to Heaven, although he does not presume to know the precise nature of his destination. It can depend only on the knowledge that Jesus imparted to the original disciples. Thomas Hardy passes on the baton to the next generation to run the race of life in a painful

²⁸²Luke 24: 5 (b)

reassessment of a tragic past and sees continuity of all living things in Nature. George Eliot leaves us with a problematic and wistful view of the human potential to contribute after death to “the growing good of the world.”²⁸³ Faith and doubt remain inextricably intertwined in the Victorian novel, but if doubt is likened to the ivy plant, it fails to destroy the tree, for as Eliot says of Gilfil, “the heart of him was sound, the grain was of the finest.”

²⁸³ *Middlemarch* Finale p.924

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